掟上今日子の乗車券

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

講談社

掟上今日子の乗車券

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Kodansha

序　文
第一枚　今日子さんin寝台特急『ひらめき』
第二枚　山麓（さんろく）オーベルジュ『ゆきどけ』
第三枚　高速艇『スピードウェーヴ』
第四枚　水上飛行機『ウォータージェット』
第五枚　観光バス『ハイスピードロード』
掟上今日子の五線譜（序曲）

The Ticket of Kyoko Okitegami

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Translation: waifutime

[redacted]

序文

[redacted]

Preface

Since I (Mamoru Oyagiri) started working at the Okitegami Detective Agency, half a year has already passed. During this time, the fastest and forgetful detective, Kyoko Okitegami, the agency's director, has rapidly solved countless cases. However, if you ask whether I can describe these cases like the assistants often do in detective novels, detailing the impossibilities and unraveling the perfect crimes, the answer is no.

Basically, I am a security guard, not an assistant—even if there were no confidentiality obligations to uphold, Ms. Kyoko is not the type of detective who requires an assistant or storyteller.

She does everything by herself.

She would never say it in this way, but her one-woman operation is due to the strict rules of mystery-solving that would otherwise limit her mental agility. If she were constantly accompanied by an assistant whose brainpower had such limitations, her greatest asset—her speed—would also be restricted. In reality, I've witnessed her efficiency firsthand when I was personally involved in a case.

However, the precariousness that comes as a consequence of that F1-like speed is inevitable. When such times arise, even a mere bodyguard like me finds a modest opportunity to shine.

But this is strictly an emergency measure. Bound by a contract dozens of pages long, I am never to delve deeply into the forgetful detective's cases.

Not wanting to know.

Not having curiosity was a major part of my employment conditions.

Though it's unofficial, I support the countless adventures of this detective who enjoys a deep trust from the police authorities from the shadows, never to be seen in public. I must admit there's a tremendous sense of fulfillment in this, but to be honest, it was somewhat anticlimactic.

When Ms. Kyoko scouted me, I felt as though I was stepping into an exciting, extraordinary world. But this job is merely an extension of my daily life, and not so different from my previous job.

Of course, this anticlimactic feeling is not a complaint.

Just as Ms. Kyoko does her job, I simply do mine—and besides, the criminal cases Ms. Kyoko deals with daily aren't something I shouldn't meddle with lightly for amusement.

If one can remain ignorant, it's better that way.

From now on, unknown and unrecognized, I will continue to protect Ms. Kyoko—that was my renewed resolve, until one day.

"Mr. Mamoru. I'm going on a trip, would you come with me?"

The white-haired detective invited me in such a manner, leading me away from the ordinary, into the extraordinary.

[redacted]

第一枚

今日子さんin寝台特急『ひらめき』

[redacted]

Ch 1: Ms. Kyoko in the Sleeper Express “Hirameki”

1

Ms. Kyoko and I managed to barely catch the 19:20 departure of the sleeper express "Hirameki." Though I felt it was a close call, for the fastest detective this was likely just another punctual boarding according to the timetable—though if it weren't for the luggage that is me, perhaps she could have taken an even earlier train.

Still, I think I'm doing quite well at keeping up—considering Ms. Kyoko only came up with the idea to depart this very afternoon. And now, by night, we are already on a train bound for the far-off V Prefecture, a whirlwind of rapid developments indeed.

But then again, for a forgetful detective who only retains a day's memory, perhaps it's only natural to act on the same day an idea comes to mind.

Ms. Kyoko has only today.

And, while I self-deprecatingly refer to myself as "luggage," I've been entrusted with two trunks worth of Ms. Kyoko's belongings, so even accounting for my size, it's inevitable that my speed would be reduced.

I'm a security guard, not a porter, but well, the luggage was too heavy for a slender-armed woman to carry, so it seems a fair division of labor—if only the trunks had wheels and could roll along the ground.

"I'm from the school of thought that trunks shouldn't have wheels," Ms. Kyoko said, dismissing the idea.

She belongs to an old-fashioned faction.

A detective who runs her own one-woman agency, seemingly part of the boorish faction rather than the self-reliant, yet Ms. Kyoko is good at utilizing people, regardless.

Well, most of the geniuses people refer to as such maintain their performance by offloading the "bothersome and tedious" tasks onto others, and Ms. Kyoko is no exception—the contents of the luggage, she says, are "mostly clothes."

Not heavy, but not exactly light either—it makes sense, given that Ms. Kyoko is a fashion leader in the detective world.

Everything was so rushed that, in contrast, I was only in my current clothes—I'm not used to traveling and didn't even bring the bare minimum of necessary items.

"Don't worry. If we need anything, we can just buy it there—regarding this trip, I will cover all of Mr. Mamoru's expenses, so please, have no concerns."

She also assured that she would provide a special allowance—while Ms. Kyoko is sometimes teased as a penny-pincher, that's only when it comes to receiving money for work. When it comes to spending, she can be surprisingly generous.

Perhaps Ms. Kyoko, who has only today, doesn't hold onto money overnight—the train tickets she arranged at the counter were for a first-class cabin.

The room, about the size of a walk-in closet, had a bunk bed on the right side upon entering and a sofa on the left. If one were inclined, the sofa could be used as a bed, making it possible for three people to use the room.

I placed the two trunks together in the corner of the room, and asked,

"Should I just go to the non-reserved seats then?"

To which Ms. Kyoko replied, "Absolutely not," stopping me in my tracks.

"We're not going on vacation. Mr. Mamoru, your job is to be my bodyguard, right? During the trip, I need you to be with me 24 hours a day, constantly."

"T-Twenty-four hours? Constantly?"

"Ah, but,"

Ms. Kyoko laughed.

"The upper bunk will be mine."

2

To be honest, my frame is too large to comfortably sleep on the upper berth of the well-worn sleeper train's bed (in an emergency, I might accidentally crush Ms. Kyoko sleeping below), but that was of little concern. What I couldn't ignore were Ms. Kyoko's words that "we're not going on vacation."

It's not a vacation? Then, what is it?

If that's the case, it may have been a coincidence, but Ms. Kyoko's fashion today, with her wide pants, colorful T-shirt topped with a denim jacket, was relatively casual. I had taken it for granted that she was on some kind of refreshing holiday...

But when you think about it, a forgetful detective whose memory resets every day is, so to speak, refreshing every night anyway, so there really wouldn't be a need to go out of her way to take a trip.

It's not a refresh but a reset, but in this case, the meaning is more or less the same—of course, even if the memory is reset, physical fatigue isn't, so I suppose she would inevitably need to take a break, but then all the more reason not to bother with a trip farther away, right?

In the first place, Ms. Kyoko, being a workaholic, felt totally off to leave the office to travel by herself—she had departed abruptly, so I hadn't been able to inquire in detail about the circumstances, but now that I had settled into my seat in the cabin and the train had started moving towards our destination, it was about time she told me the purpose of our journey.

"There's a purpose, but what I don't have is a destination. Deciding to board this sleeper train was also something I decided on the spot after hearing a story from the gentleman at the ticket window. Oh, the timing was just perfect."

"Ah, is that so?"

What's that about, it's too lenient. More lenient than a non-reserved seat.

We're not just taking a leisurely walk around the neighborhood.

I thought it might be a joke, but the expression of the woman sitting side by side with me on the cabin's sofa, while ever cheerful, was still utterly serious.

However, if there was no timetable and no schedule, it all becomes even more confusing.

"Could it be that there was some trouble with work? That you needed to lay low for a short period..."

"It's not that kind of escapism. There's no way there could be any trouble when you, Mr. Mamoru, are watching over me—after all, rather than turning tail at trouble, it is the detective's job to dive headlong into it."

"Yes, I understand that, but..."

Even as I say that, I felt somewhat embarrassed to have been trusted so naturally when she said, "You're watching over me."

Of course, I was fully aware that it was merely a social nicety, a propriety of an employer—because every time she went to bed and her memory reset, she would forget not

only that she had employed me as an office guard, but also that I existed in the first place, clean and clearly.

A reset—truly.

"Then, why suggest such a journey without a clear destination? Work requests could come at any time at our drop-in detective agency, where we don't accept prior reservations."

It couldn't possibly be a journey of self-discovery—Ms. Kyoko doesn't have a self to search for, and even if she did, she would soon forget it.

"Yes. That's why it's a trip for work. Even a forgetful detective like me needs to make sales efforts to make a living over the long term."

"Sales efforts?"

"Yes. In other words, sales."

"...?"

She stated it as if it were the answer to a riddle, but it felt like I was presented with a new riddle—sales?

It's like being told, "The culprit is someone."

When she clearly stated that this was not a vacation, I had guessed that this journey was part of a detective's work, but a forgetful detective whose memory resets every sleep would have to refuse cases that take more than one day to resolve, so to speak, overnight cases.

Unfortunately, according to the rules of detective work, as in mystery novels, cases like "mansion mysteries" are strictly off-limits—even if she were to travel far for a request, it should fundamentally be a day trip.

"Indeed. But that's strictly when there's a request. When it comes to showing up unannounced, I'm not so particular about confidentiality."

"Showing up unannounced—for sales."

"Yes. So the point is, sales."

'It's tough being a private office, huh,' she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

Hmm. Even if I don't quite understand, I'm gradually beginning to.

Rather than waiting for requests at the office, it seems that the only plan for this journey is for the detective to stick her neck into cases, or to literally dive into incidents—whether such a rough idea can be called a plan is another matter, but there are indeed mystery novels with such a pattern.

A famous detective who appears at the scene of a crime unannounced, solving the case while being shunned by local detectives—though I thought Ms. Kyoko, as a professional detective, was unrelated to the stance of "just loving to solve mysteries."

Moreover, in the destination of this sleeper train, V Prefecture, would there be any inscrutable incidents for a famous detective to have a reason to act?

"There's no particular destination, so, you see. I don’t mean I dislike solving mysteries, but I'm not so fond of poking my nose into trouble when it doesn't even pay. After all, sales are sales. You could even call it advertising."

"Advertising... Ah."

I see. With that phrasing, it finally made sense.

It might have been my slow understanding, but even upon reflecting, it was an extraordinarily unusual motivation for a journey.

Even though it’s a profession bound by confidentiality, the Okitegami Detective Agency boasts of absolute adherence to it—the detective herself forgets not only the truth of the incidents but even the fact that there was a request by the next day, certified forgetfulness.

That sense of security has become its reputation, and new clients will likely come, but, unfortunately, there's also the disadvantage that the reputation doesn't spread widely among the people.

The detective herself forgets about the cases, and the clients are likely to keep their mouths shut, so there's no one to pass down the tales of Ms. Kyoko's exploits.

In the end, it remains within the realm of "well-known but to the few."

The chance of hiring a detective to solve a case is something that happens once or perhaps twice in a lifetime. It's not like there are clients who get entangled in incidents over and over again and ask for Ms. Kyoko's help each time, so eventually, the business would dwindle.

Is that why she's doing sales activities?

Since there aren't constant requests from police organizations, it may indeed be an essential sales effort for a forgetful detective.

Although, whether she has been making such efforts until now is highly questionable.

This might be a long journey that she could only undertake because she hired me as a bodyguard—it would be too risky for the forgetful detective to travel alone otherwise.

She seems to be planning to share a room and live with me, a man of the opposite sex, and she appears to be aware of that—it makes me unsure whether her caution is strong or weak.

Nevertheless, I will simply fulfill my duties as usual.

No, I need to be even more focused than usual.

While Ms. Kyoko bases her actions (or life) at the Okitegami Detective Agency, there's hardly a need for me, as it's a lump of the latest security, but when she goes out and acts (or lives) there for an extended period, the only one who can protect her is me—it's been half a year since she hired me, and maybe the probationary period has finally ended.

"Even pretending to be a hobbyist detective without clients is part of the job," Ms. Kyoko said with a matter-of-fact tone.

"In the meantime, I realize it may be a bit of a nuisance, but Mr. Mamoru, I'm counting on you. From today onwards, for a while, my life is in your hands."

"Y-Yes, certainly."

It's one thing to be responsible for someone's safety, but when it's their life on the line, it adds a certain tension. However, it’s probably not an exaggeration. Even Ms. Kyoko, who has gracefully overcome a variety of perilous situations (though she doesn't remember them), is at an impasse when it comes to long-term spans; she's a complete wildcard.

"By the way, Ms. Kyoko, how long do you plan to travel? A two-night three-day trip, or maybe three nights and four days... that won’t be enough, right? It’s for an advertising campaign, after all. About a month?"

"I haven't decided on a specific duration. Even if I did, I'll probably forget by tomorrow. That's why I'm going to rely on you from the start—I'll be completely dependent on you. You can say 'this is too much' whenever you feel it's necessary, and I will comply fully."

"As a guideline, think of maybe solving about five cases," Ms. Kyoko said, spreading her hand open to show five fingers.

Five cases...?

Compared to the number of cases Ms. Kyoko usually deduces, that doesn't seem like too much. However, the situation changes when one is on a journey and the cases are unexpected.

Encountering an impossible crime once or twice in a lifetime would be too much, let alone five times on a single trip.

Or perhaps, is there top-secret information suggesting that incidents will occur in V Prefecture, the destination of this sleeper train "Hirameki"?

"No, no, as I've said many times, the destination doesn't hold much significance. If anything, remember, I am a detective, after all."

Somewhere along the way, Ms. Kyoko had purchased what appeared to be two lunch boxes at the departure station, and while offering one to me, she puffed out her chest with pride.

"Travel and the cases will come to me."

3

It's become a widely accepted theory that one should not choose a famous detective as a travel companion. Whether the main character is a detective or not, they tend to get involved in murder cases, even in their private lives.

It seems Ms. Kyoko plans to turn this situation to her advantage in her promotional activities—intending to travel without a set destination and wait to be caught up in spontaneous incidents.

Proactive passivism, or perhaps passive proactivism.

One might say it's rather morbid to hope for trouble, but if we speak of such things, the profession of detective itself is morbid to the core—alternatively, it's a praiseworthy act of selfless good, solving troubles that would have likely gone unnoticed otherwise.

It's promotional activity, not charity work, though.

In reality, "famous detectives" actively seek out the troubles that ordinary people unconsciously avoid. Incidents are scattered all over the world—visible to some, invisible to others.

Conversely, people often try to hide troubles (as the case that led to my firing from my previous job did), and famous detectives who seek to expose these troubles could be seen as disruptors of the peace (as the aforementioned joke suggests). But that aside...

Still, though I understand the logic, as I ate the lunch box and my stomach grumbled, I couldn't help but feel this was just a whim of Ms. Kyoko's, rather than a well-thought-out plan.

It can't possibly be that easy.

Certainly, if one looks closely enough, society at large may seem to be a breeding ground for crime, teeming with accidents—as if to say, just as a dog walking is sure to hit a stick, a detective in motion is bound to encounter incidents. One might be deluded into thinking there's a fraction of reason to this, but when it comes to the kind of cases that require the talents of a famous detective, it seems to be a different story altogether.

Encountering impossible crimes on a trip might as well be considered the product of fiction, or akin to fantasy.

However, I did not begin our journey by dampening spirits with such thoughts.

If that's the case, then so be it, I thought.

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today, and therefore she argues that she needs no such thing as a refreshing vacation. It's a rationalization indeed, and even though it may be forgotten the next day, I believe that the memories made on a trip can have a positive influence on her.

Visiting museums, reading books, or obsessing over coffee beans—dismissing such hobbies and pleasures on the grounds that "they will be forgotten anyway" can hardly be said to be a sign of robust health—surely, these activities must be underpinning her detective work from behind the scenes.

She is still too young to say that travelling is just exhausting and that it is much better to stay at home on holiday.

Hence, even if this trip doesn't result in a single encounter with an incident, it could still be considered a success.

The fact that she left the timing of our return trip up to me was a bit of pressure, but it also eased my mind.

After all, as a forgetful detective, work comes in regularly from all quarters without the need for advertising; it's an investment in the future. The office cannot be left unattended forever.

At most, wandering around various parts of Japan for two weeks should be sufficient (given that Ms. Kyoko's past is completely unknown, she is, in effect, unable to obtain a passport, and thus unlikely to travel abroad—probably).

As her bodyguard, I cannot afford to let my guard down, but rather, I must be even more vigilant than usual. Nonetheless, I hope this vacation disguised as an incident-hunting trip will prove to be a good break for Ms. Kyoko.

Thinking such, I must admit I was quite naive.

In reality, having not witnessed her exploits firsthand in the six months since I was employed, I had underestimated her qualities as a detective, as a famous detective at that—unaware of the extent to which her presence attracts cases and mysteries, bound by conventional views.

Far from encountering a murder case at our destination.

The next morning, while in the car on the move, we stumbled upon a homicide.

4

Perhaps Ms. Kyoko had anticipated this development yesterday. Even though we were heading to V Prefecture, which was by no means our intended destination, there was no need to take a sleeper train—planes were still flying at that hour.

Ms. Kyoko, who does not skimp on expenses when it comes to paying, could have chosen that route, which would have been, indeed, speedier.

Yet, she deliberately chose a traditional sleeper express, falling out of service one after the other these days, as our mode of transportation—perhaps some intuition was at work.

Regardless, that was yesterday’s matter, and whether it was intuition or deduction, asking Ms. Kyoko herself would not unveil the truth, lost as it is in oblivion—anyway, it's the morning of the second day of our incident-hunting trip.

Awakening, I carefully rose without making a sound so as not to wake Ms. Kyoko, sleeping on the upper bunk, and got down from the bed.

For such occasions, I slept without drawing the curtains—a security guard's practice.

And before a knock could come, I opened the door to our cabin.

Needless to say, I took care not to make a sound when unlocking the door and sliding it open horizontally, but,

"Eek!"

As I surprised the person in the hallway, all my efforts were for naught. It was the inconsiderate footsteps of someone approaching the guest room that woke me up—thinking it could be some tricky character, I was overly sensitive. But it turned out to be a crew member with a name tag.

The name tag read "An-i."

"E-Err—I heard that there is a detective staying here?"

It must be a ticket check, but even so, it's excessively early for that (it's 6:30 AM)—I quickly considered various possibilities, but what An-i, the crew member, uttered was a line I could never have imagined.

A detective?

Well, yes, there is one here... as I say this, I look back over my shoulder.

Ms. Kyoko, unlike me, had properly closed her curtains to sleep, and there seemed to be no sign of them opening—it seemed that An-i's astonished scream had not woken her.

The reason for his scream was not just because the door opened without a knock, but probably also because of the shock at my towering stature—though even before that, from the moment he ran down the hallway, he seemed to be in a state of panic.

It didn't seem to be the sort of crisis Ms. Kyoko might fear (like a past culprit with a grudge against her for uncovering their crime coming to visit—or an overly enthusiastic fan)—but instead, it seemed certain she was in some kind of crisis, truly.

Yet, as someone whose sole job is to protect her, it was difficult to decide whether to nod in response to his inquiry...

If I were merely a bodyguard, the theory would be to say "no" and lie, sending An-i away and keeping my charge clear of any apparent trouble. However, in this case, Ms. Kyoko is traveling to get closer to trouble...

First of all, who told this crew member that a detective was staying in this room, and from where did he hear it?

Until the background of this is clear, I can't just nod along—just as I tentatively made that decision,

"Yes. If you're looking for a detective, she is right here."

Suddenly, the curtain of the upper bunk bed was pulled back with a swish—as if a ninja had appeared.

Not just in the turn of phrase, but her attire also harkened back to a ninja—of course, that's not to say Ms. Kyoko appeared in a ninja look.

Last night, when she climbed the ladder to her bed, she was definitely in a comfy, loose-fitting pajama, but now she had changed into a red blazer, ready for work.

A quick change.

It seems I was too quick to think that Ms. Kyoko hadn't woken up from An-i's scream—at that moment, she had awakened and spent the subsequent time grasping the situation and changing her clothes.

Indeed, the curtained bed resembles a fitting room... Ms. Kyoko smiled at me and said,

"So, are you the Kind Mr. Mamoru who will be protecting me? Thank you, it's nice to meet you. I look forward to working with you today."

*TL Note: His "Oyagiri" surname can also be read as “kind” (“shinsetsu”)

‘Excuse me for being so high up.’

And with that, she lowered her white-haired head.

5

Before introducing the details of the murder incident that occurred onboard the "Hirameki" sleeper express, though it may be belated, let me explain once again about the system of the Forgetful Detective.

As I have already mentioned, she is the Forgetful Detective whose memory resets every time she sleeps, but as to how far her memory resets, to be honest, it's unclear.

As a bodyguard, I've had several opportunities to consider this point (this point of interest), but the impression is that there's quite a range depending on the situation—only Ms. Kyoko knows the truth, and I believe she intentionally spreads rumors at different times to blur that truth.

Even so, from what I can see, at least up until the date and time before she became a detective, it's certain that Ms. Kyoko's memory has been reset.

In other words, every time Ms. Kyoko wakes up, she must remember that she is a detective. She writes a memo on her arm for this purpose, something like this:

"My name is Kyoko Okitegami. 25 years old. The forgetful detective who loses her memory every time she sleeps."

However, there is some doubt about the reliability of this memo. For example, the meaning of this note hasn't changed since I met her, but it's somewhat mysterious that the "25 years old" part hasn't changed even after half a year.

Of course, depending on the birthday, it wouldn't be strange, but still, even after a year, Ms. Kyoko seems to remain 25 years old—maybe she's the kind of detective who doesn't age, like in any old cartoon series (strictly speaking, in some cartoons there are clear depictions of aging, so even this metaphor feels odd to me—but I digress).

Anyway, Ms. Kyoko looks at the handwritten characters on her left arm and remembers what you might call her "settings."

That being said, Ms. Kyoko has slender arms that couldn't carry a trunk, so the area to write on is small, and the explanation of her settings seems a bit insufficient. However, with her deductive reasoning, such a short sentence is enough. She probably reads not just the text but also the handwriting style.

Thus, the forgetful detective continues her intermittent detective work while maintaining a precarious balance—but for this trip, one more sentence needs to be added.

Last night, before going to sleep, Ms. Kyoko held a pen in her left hand and wrote on her right arm:

"Currently on a trip (open for business)"

"Protected by Mr. Mamoru Oyagiri"

And so, as soon as Ms. Kyoko woke up on the bunk bed of the sleeper train, she instinctively and habitually got dressed—as if dressing were an instinct for her—and then immediately gathered information from both arms to grasp the situation.

Perhaps it was too few words, but it seemed that she had mistaken me for "Kind Mr. Mamoru," but well, that kind of miscommunication is within the margin of error, or should I say, it's part of her charm.

After confirming the answer, Ms. Kyoko turned to the train attendant An-i and said,

"So, what happened? I hope I can be of help."

With her business talk and smile, you wouldn't know she had just woken up, except for the fact she was on the bed.

"Y-Yes... Could I start by telling you the story? Somewhere more conducive to talking than here..."

It seemed that the attendant, An-i, hadn't expected the "detective" who had come to visit to be a young woman like Ms. Kyoko, and he looked even more confused as he said that.

Listening closely, I realized the confusion was evident from the way he said "than here" about the room where Ms. Kyoko and I had stayed as passengers. However, it would be cruel to blame him for that.

After all, he is in the midst of one of the rare moments in life when one needs a detective.

Regardless of the eager detective, as someone whose job it is to protect her, I have something to confirm with attendant An-i before the request can be accepted—why did he know beforehand that a detective was staying in this room?

Until that becomes clear, I can't let Ms. Kyoko get out of bed.

"That's because... I was instructed to when I notified the railway police... that a detective should be on this train, and I should seek them out," he stuttered.

Railway police? Oh, well, in other words, the police. I remember hearing stories of judicial police officers among the station staff back in the days of National Railways...

Certainly, it seems that the whereabouts of Ms. Kyoko were conveyed by the police—it's not a surprise, considering that even though it's unofficial, the Okitegami Detective Agency has connections with the police organization. However, it was also a somewhat frightening tale.

Is the Forgetful Detective being monitored in her movements by state power...?

Contrary to me, who felt a chill down my spine, Ms. Kyoko easily accepted it saying, "Yes, yes. If it is a referral from the police, there's no problem at all," and she cheerfully climbed down the ladder.

"Then let's resolve the case immediately—the fastest."

6

In the sleeper express "Hirameki," there are special, first-class, and regular compartments, as well as non-reserved seats. Ms. Kyoko and I stayed in the first-class compartment, while the murder occurred in the regular compartment.

And to hear about that, we moved to the special compartment—I thought the first-class compartment was luxurious enough, but the special compartment was on a different level entirely.

It was so opulent that it could be called unnecessary.

It is not surprising that Ms. Kyoko, who is generous with what she pays, held out for a first-class cabin, and it is also no wonder that the special-class carriages are not fully booked.

At the same time, I could understand why Mr. An-i, the train attendant, would want to change the location. Apart from the furnishings of the room, the walls of the special compartment seemed to be very thick.

Even the first-class compartment would have probably been fine, but here, there is no chance in the world that our voices would leak outside while discussing the case.

If it was necessary to keep such extreme secrecy, perhaps I should have excused myself, but in this particular case, I couldn't—after all, I had been given strict orders to be at Ms. Kyoko's side twenty-four hours a day.

Well, she had received Mr. An-i's visit as a detective by chance, not as the Forgetful Detective, so the presence of an assistant-like figure was tolerated. Nevertheless, while not insisting on absolute confidentiality, it was unavoidable that a normal level of detective secrecy would be imposed.

Therefore, please understand that a certain level of consideration is necessary, and the names of the individuals appearing in the following summary of the case are all pseudonyms, for clarity.

When summarizing Mr. An-i's rather disorganized story, it goes like this:

In the morning, a passenger was found murdered in a bunk in the regular compartment—the cause of death appeared to be blunt force trauma to the back of the head. It was clear that life-saving measures were too late.

The victim's name was Ichizo Ichikawa (a pseudonym).

He seemed to be traveling alone, without companions.

It was a case that could be categorized without issue as a suspicious or unnatural death, and while Mr. An-i was agitated, he had immediately evacuated the other passengers from the room to preserve the crime scene and reported to the police via radio.

Even now, he was still visibly shaken in front of the detective, but in that respect, he had faithfully fulfilled his duties—commendable indeed.

"However, if things remain as is, when we reach the next station, we will have no choice but to suspend the train's operation. In other words, without waiting to arrive in V Prefecture, we'll have to ask all passengers to disembark..."

"Hmm, that is troublesome. It would be a tragedy not to be able to reach V Prefecture."

Ms. Kyoko tilted her head as if she were truly troubled, but she probably had, until just now, forgotten that this train was bound for V Prefecture.

It's not clear how much or what exactly Mr. An-i knows about Ms. Kyoko from the railway police, but pressing him further mentally, when he is already muddled, would not be a smart move for us either, so we are keeping the fact that she is the Forgetful Detective a secret.

Therefore, I also went along with it saying,

"But well, even if we're dropped off at the next station, we could just take a connecting train, right? We've already come quite close to V Prefecture after spending the night on the train, haven't we?"

"It won't be that simple. If there is a clear case of homicide within a speeding train, it's certain that the culprit is among the passengers or crew."

Her nonchalant delivery made it feel like I was merely listening to logical reasoning, but no, it was quite a heavy deduction indeed.

And she was right.

We're still running on the rails as I speak, so it doesn't quite hit home, but this is what you'd call a closed circle crime.

A moving sealed room.

With no night stops at stations, no one—not even the crew—could escape outside.

Including Ms. Kyoko and myself, everyone on this train is a suspect, and after we're offloaded at the next station, what awaits us is an interrogation.

"Everyone being a suspect is a bit of an exaggeration, a bit theatrical even. By the way, Mr. An-i, how many people are currently aware of the murder that occurred on this train?"

"The information has been shared among the crew. We took as much care as possible so as not to cause panic among the passengers. However, we couldn't not inform those who were in the same room, including the first discoverer..."

He seemed to be the one panicking, but his actions were precise. No complaints there.

"The same room..."

Something caught her interest, and she repeated those words before declaring, "I see. I think I understand now."

I was shocked by the detective's swift conclusion, thinking she had already identified the culprit. But that was jumping the gun. What Ms. Kyoko had grasped at this point was why crew member An-i had come to visit her.

"In short, I just need to identify the murderer before this sleeper express arrives at the next station, correct? From the situation where 'everyone is a suspect,' if I narrow it down to just one, only they will need to disembark, and the train can continue on its schedule without disruption—allowing Mr. Mamoru and myself to proceed untroubled to our destination in V Prefecture."

Despite having said yesterday that V Prefecture wasn't our destination, Ms. Kyoko feigned ignorance. But this wasn't a matter of forgetting or not remembering—it was clear that she had understood the purpose of our journey upon seeing the words "Currently on a trip (open for business)" written in her own hand on her right arm. To the outside world, she had to pretend otherwise; one couldn't just openly say, "I'm trying to solve a coincidental case I encountered on the way to make a name for myself."

In that sense, things were unfolding exactly as Ms. Kyoko's insightful eyes had predicted.

But to "identify the murderer before the train arrives at the next station"?

Was that a request from the railway police to Ms. Kyoko?

No, indeed, if it could be done, preserving the crime scene until the end of the line would be possible—perhaps minimizing damage to unrelated passengers and financial loss due to schedule disruptions. But, "the next station"?

I had boarded the train in such a hurry that I hadn't properly grasped which route it took or which stations it stopped at. It's already morning, and no matter how you slice it, there's barely any time left, is there?

A case with a time limit is nothing new to the forgetful detective, but even so...

"Don't worry, Mr. Mamoru. I checked the timetable when I woke up, and we arrive at P Station at 7:36 AM—that means we have just fifty-five minutes to resolve the case."

Fifty-five minutes. That's not even an hour.

The situation was still unclear for her as she woke up, but as usual, it was impressive how she was checking the timetable without missing a beat. Yet, the idea of trying to solve a murder case in that brief moment seemed utterly absurd; if a normal person were to dawdle during that time, they'd end up doing nothing.

However, it seemed that the excessively harsh time limit only served to arouse her motivation even further.

"Very well, let's do this. The punctuality of trains is the pride of Japan, after all," she declared.

"First, let us see the crime scene."

7

To see the crime scene meant to see the corpse of the victim, one Ichizo Ichikawa. Although I have been employed at a detective agency for half a year, and this wasn't my first encounter with a cadaver, one never gets used to it. Moreover, being involved in an investigation at such close quarters certainly left a different impression.

I had no choice but to convince myself that this was a job that someone had to do (though considering the nature of soliciting business, whether this "had to be done" was a bit dubious).

In contrast, Ms. Kyoko's steps were light as she moved from the superior class carriages through first-class and on towards the ordinary carriages. She looked like a child who found running through the train amusing—her mental state, cutting through the discomfort of death with a unique resolve that seemed to say, "After all, I'll forget it by tomorrow," was beyond my grasp.

The conductor, An-i, was not accompanying us for this investigation. I was not privy to what had been discussed, but it appeared that he was given carte blanche (or rather, had responsibility thrust upon him) by the railway company regarding this matter. He seemed to be in over his head with too many tasks—starting, urgently, with the explanation he had to give to the passengers who had shared the compartment with the victim.

In this day and age, keeping everyone quiet would not be easy.

If the train were to be swarmed by the media at the next station, it would be a disaster—whether or not the culprit had been identified, the travel would inevitably have to be suspended.

Given his unreliable demeanor, I could not but feel a grave uncertainty about whether any cover-up operation would go smoothly.

"What do you think? In the end, we may just have to leave it to luck, but, well, I think it will probably go well," Ms. Kyoko said, maintaining her pace.

It sounded like a casual, baseless assurance, yet she was not one to make light of a murder case.

"And why is that?"

"Well, if you think about it normally, the culprit is among the passengers who shared the room. It's unlikely that someone who knows they're the prime suspect would go around broadcasting that fact."

I, who hadn't even begun to think 'normally' about it, was surprised rather than convinced by her assertion—but certainly, if a murder had occurred in a room with a certain degree of enclosed space, it was logical to suspect those who were present.

According to the conductor, An-i, the passengers who had shared the compartment with the victim had been moved to the superior carriages—I had thought it was merely generous hospitality for passengers inconvenienced by unforeseen trouble, but perhaps it was also a measure to isolate the suspects from the other passengers.

If that was the case, An-i was cleverer than he seemed, nervously going about his duties with remarkable competence. Perhaps Ms. Kyoko wasn't just blindly optimistic about the success of the silence; maybe she was counting on An-i's skillfulness. While I was lost in thought about such matters, we arrived at the crime scene.

"Excuse us," Ms. Kyoko announced.

Without hesitation or delay, Ms. Kyoko stepped into the ordinary passenger room number three—a greeting seemed unnecessary, there was no one inside after all.

Or perhaps, she was greeting the remains of Mr. Ichizo Ichikawa.

Following her in, perhaps because I had previously seen the superior room, I found the room so cramped that in my size, I could hardly move while standing.

After all, to call it a room is a stretch, as it lacks even a door. Currently, a "Do Not Enter" rope is stretched across it (likely by the efforts of the crew member An-i), but essentially it's just a space with three-tier bunk beds fixed to the left and right, solely meant for sleeping.

Without even curtains on the beds, changing clothes becomes an impractical task. Although it may be reminiscent of a bygone era, it's not a room setup I would recommend to women today.

Ms. Kyoko had unhesitatingly chosen the top bunk in a first-class room, but in this place, it's hard to say the top tier is the best spot. With the three-tier bunks, there's scarcely ten centimeters between you and the ceiling when you're lying down.

The bedding seems so thin, one might as well be sleeping on the floor... Perhaps staying seated in an unreserved seat might be more comfortable—it's a part of the journey's unique charm, after all.

As rude as it is to complain about something that is not your own business.

Maybe Mr. Ichizo Ichikawa was trying to savor that charm... but if that resulted in losing his life, it's a ticket I can't recommend to women, and certainly not to men.

By the way, where is his body?

"Here it is. It might be hard for you to see because of your height," said Ms. Kyoko, squatting down and peering into the lower bunk on the right. Her expression was serious, the smile gone from her face.

Indeed, if he were laid there, I couldn't see it from my standing position due to the angle.

"Please stay standing. It's not a pleasant sight."

She was very considerate to me, who wouldn't be losing my memory the very next day-I thought I shouldn't be so lenient, but even if I had seen the victim, there was nothing I could do.

I don't know what kind of life the victim led (I haven't even asked his age), but as someone who can't assist in identifying the perpetrator, I doubt he'd want me to see his deathly visage.

"You won't be able to see his face anyway. He passed away face-down," said Ms. Kyoko.

"The skull is severely fractured, suggesting an instant death. Whether that's any consolation, given he didn't suffer, is hard to say. The blood spatter on the sheets has completely dried, so it's safe to assume the crime was committed at night."

Just listening made me feel queasy.

It was indeed best not to look.

To protect Ms. Kyoko during our trip, I must stay in top shape, both mentally and physically—still, it's frustrating not to be of any use in this detective work.

With that thought, I asked her, "Does the blood spatter on the sheets mean he was attacked while sleeping?"

"It's possible. Some people sleep face-down, or it could have happened while he was turning over in his sleep," she agreed, but cautiously added, "However, it seems difficult to strike the victim in such a crouched position."

"And the space is too confined to slip into bed with him. This bed is not made for two. Mr. Ichikawa's belongings are also packed at the foot of the bed, leaving almost no extra space. Especially for a physical altercation."

Certainly, that makes sense.

If it were me, I wouldn't be able to sleep without folding my knees, even if I were alone. If I wasn't careful, there's even a chance I wouldn't be able to get out of bed.

"Hmm. Indeed, compared to you, Mr. Mamoru, the victim is on the petite side."

I doubt there are many Japanese who aren't petite compared to me, but anyway, she said that and stood up.

Then she moved to the opposite side of the triple bunk bed and sat down on the lowest level—naturally leaning forward to avoid hitting her white-haired head on the second-tier sleeping area.

With that positioning, she should be facing directly towards the corpse, but Ms. Kyoko seemed unconcerned. She may pay her respects to the dead body but isn't the type to be frightened by it. As for me, with her sitting alone, already hard to meet eyes with, it put me in a somewhat uncomfortable position (or should I say, literally an uncomfortable standing position).

If possible, I also wanted to sit down and bring my head to the same height as hers, but of course, I couldn't just sit on the bed with the corpse, and if I sat next to her, I would end up facing the corpse head-on.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Mamoru?"

Well, since she doesn't seem bothered by this difference in height from which I look down on her, I guess I can endure a little (standing) discomfort.

"No... That aside, have you figured anything out?"

"I'm a detective, not a psychic. Just by looking at the corpse, I won't know who the criminal is. The investigation has only just begun."

"It has only just begun..."

I look at the watch.

Either way, it looks like it will be over soon... but there's only forty minutes left.

It's very unsatisfactory that Ms. Kyoko's expedition, which has only just begun, could be interrupted by the first train.

The reputation of the fastest detective could spread for all the wrong reasons. After all, it's absurd to expect a case to be solved in less than an hour.

"It was said to be a solo trip, right? So, rather than a grudge, does it feel more like a random robbery-homicide?"

"Well, who knows. I've rummaged through the pockets and luggage lightly, but the wallet and valuables hadn't been touched. I was careful not to leave fingerprints as I searched, so there might be something I overlooked."

She said this as if it were natural—she has been doing as she pleases at angles I can't see. It wasn't that she was considerate of me, but perhaps she wanted to avoid being witnessed conducting an illegal investigation.

"Then... could it be a grudge? Perhaps someone who bore a grudge against Mr. Ichikawa secretly boarded the same train..."

In that case, the perpetrator wouldn't be a fellow passenger in the same room... Surely one would notice if someone who bore a grudge against them was in the same room.

"I don't know. It's possible that the victim was unaware of being resented, or maybe, just within a few minutes of meeting in this room, they managed to be resented."

As if such a thing could happen—but I can't say it's impossible.

Ms. Kyoko, who deduces through considering all possibilities paradoxically, would not exclude even the slightest possibility.

However, she doesn't seem to favor the approach from the motivation aspect too much...

"For now, there are only two things that can be said for certain. One, the victim was killed last night, and two, it is undoubtedly a murder case."

She might have just reaffirmed what was already known even before visiting the scene, but, well, neglecting to verify the facts in favor of speed is not the way of the fastest detective.

"Yes. The case could also be that there actually wasn't a murder, and the objective was to play around with me, a detective."

"If we consider such cases as well, there's no amount of time that would suffice..."

"Rest assured. The concept of time is a problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned."

No, that's someone else.

*TL Note: reference to Nisio Isin's "Risuka" series, almost literal quote from the MC

As I hesitated, wondering if I should retort, perhaps feeling uncomfortable with me looking down on her, Ms. Kyoko stood up.

Then she declared,

"The crime scene investigation concludes with this. Next, let's move on to the interviews—let's hear from the passengers who shared the room, shall we?"

The passengers who shared the room.

In other words, that means the suspects—in retrospect, facing the murderer is indeed far more terrifying than facing the corpse itself.

All I could do was hope that it wasn't my turn to be involved.

8

My turn did not come.

The interviews proceeded smoothly and came to an end—the "suspects" were very cooperative, and perhaps if I, with my intimidating physique, hadn't been standing next to Ms. Kyoko, the interview might have concluded more briskly.

My prayers were answered, after all...

Given my role as a bodyguard who must prioritize Ms. Kyoko's safety over the resolution of the case, I racked my brain for a solution. The interviews were conducted one by one, and we made sure that there were always more of us than them. However, as it turned out, the "suspects" had been isolated in individual first-class rooms—a far cry from the ordinary rooms we were used to, it was an abrupt shift to almost VIP treatment, but when considering that they may have

conspired to kill Mr. Ichizo Ichikawa, it was only natural to keep them "locked" in separate rooms to prevent them from concocting a consistent story.

The conductor An-i was standing in the hallway, seemingly keeping watch over the three doors—it wasn't my job to ensure his safety, but the thought of a possible three-on-one scenario made me worry.

Nevertheless, the three passengers who shared the room with the victim were the following:

Nihei Niki (pseudonym). Mitsuhiko Misaka (pseudonym). Shiro Shimura (pseudonym).

Whether the culprit is among them is uncertain, but if not, solving the case within the time limit becomes virtually impossible, so I hope they are.

"It's not good, Mr. Mamoru. Such a way of thinking can lead to a miscarriage of justice," said Ms. Kyoko earnestly.

The interviews were over, and we had returned to the first-class cabin. There was no sign of haste from her—even though about ten minutes per person had been spent on the interviews (which was still quite smooth), and the remaining time was now less than ten minutes, she remained composed.

Even though my turn did not come, and despite not getting any particular information from the three roommates...

"Oh no. That's not necessarily true. After hearing from all three, the true nature of the incident has almost become clear."

"What?"

What was that? What did she just say?

I stood up from the sofa in a hurry, but Ms. Kyoko remained composed.

She calmed me down, saying, "Now, now. It's only 'almost' clear."

"We didn't confront anyone on the spot because we have no evidence. It's better if there's no need for you to get involved, Mr. Mamoru. I could have informed Mr. An-i, but he seems like the type whose face would give away his agitation."

"Ah... well, yes."

He seemed to be perpetually agitated, so I thought that one more layer of agitation wouldn't make much difference, but her judgment was probably correct.

Just because the truth is clear doesn't mean we have to flaunt it openly. The suspects have already been isolated and secured, so there's no need to thrust our deductions upon the criminal.

"Right. If you say ensure, then I must also firmly ensure my own safety. The truth can be shared with the local policeman who is waiting at the next station during the stopover."

By that point, it would probably be too late to change the train's schedule, and personally, I think it's already quite tight at this moment—it feels less like a game of cat and mouse between a detective and a criminal, and more like a game between a traveler and the railway company.

I mean, not that I'm suspecting anything (I'm not a detective), but the truth she "almost" understood through questioning may not be correct—if the train continues to operate, there's a chance the culprit could escape, so it's risky to state uncertain assumptions.

At least, I have no clue which one of those three could be the criminal...

"Among those three—that's correct, isn't it? There's no twist, like the train attendant An-i being the criminal?"

"Yes. You've been reading too many detective novels."

If the master detective says so, there's nothing else I can add.

With that in mind, I recalled the testimonies of the three suspects.

The first person I questioned among the three was Mr. Nihei Niki, the first person to discover the victim.

"He asked me to wake him up. He had plans to get off at the first station in the morning and didn't want to oversleep. I was planning to ride till the last stop, so I didn't need to wake up early, but he was a pushy person. Well, it was a hassle, but since I'm used to waking up early anyway, I thought it would be fine. However, I wish I had refused. If I had known it would come to this."

When he tried to wake him up as promised, he discovered the victim had been bludgeoned to death—and the testimony that he then rushed out into the hallway and informed the patrolling train attendant An-i of the abnormality matched the account of the latter, showing no contradiction.

Ms. Kyoko, who took over the conversation, asked,

"Why did Mr. Ichikawa ask you, instead of the other two? Or, had he also asked the other two out of cautiousness?"

"I don't know. Maybe simply because I was the closest? I was sleeping in the bunk directly above him... right above his seat. Also, when I got on the train and crawled into the cabin, the other two were already asleep. He might have asked them before going to sleep. But still, I was the one who woke him up. Or well, I never got around to waking him up. Because he was dead."

Perhaps because he experienced the abnormality of discovering a dead body, Mr. Niki was oddly verbose—or maybe, he was excited by the extraordinary situation of being in a first-class cabin.

In any case, it seems like the aftershock could be scary.

"I want to go to V Prefecture, but I wonder if the train will stop."

He was worried about something like that.

If one were to speak too ethically, given that a fellow passenger in the same room had died, and had been murdered at that, one would expect him to show a more sincere attitude of mourning, but well, perhaps that's just how reality is.

The view that human death is an abnormality is, in fact, one-sided; if you live for many years, everyone will face someone's death—naturally, they also naturally acquire ways to avert their eyes from that reality.

Just as I suppress fear and agitation under the righteous pretext of "protecting Ms. Kyoko"—or perhaps, just as she will forget about death and murder by tomorrow.

"Was this your first encounter with Mr. Ichikawa? Did you notice anything odd while talking to him?"

In the limited time, Ms. Kyoko threw other such banal questions, but Mr. Niki replied that it was the first encounter and he didn't notice anything—although, if he were the criminal, he would answer the same way regardless, and would certainly not share if he had noticed anything odd.

The same could be said about Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura, the other two.

The second person we questioned, Mr. Misaka, was...

"He was the first one in the passenger room. A strangely affable guy, he came up to me and started making familiar conversation. Sitting on his bed, he was drinking a canned beer or something. Since I was traveling alone wanting to be by myself, honestly, I wasn't too pleased. But I couldn't just ignore him, so I went along with the conversation—then I quickly fell asleep. But I never imagined he'd be killed. If I'd known, maybe I should have listened to him more seriously."

That's what he said.

It was a sympathetic statement, but even if there had been a quarrel during the initial conversation with the victim, it's unlikely he would voluntarily tell that to a detective he just met.

However, according to the story of Mr. Shimura, who conducted the last interview, when he entered the passenger room, Mr. Misaka and the victim seemed to be enjoying a casual chat.

Maybe Mr. Misaka was just good at keeping the conversation going, or perhaps now he feels guilty for having been friendly with the victim.

"I joined in the conversation and talked a bit too. But it wasn't anything deep. I didn't have a bad impression of him, but since he was a chatty person, I thought it would be annoying if he talked to me while I was trying to sleep, so I decided to sleep on the bed opposite Mr. Ichikawa. It wasn't planned, but Mr. Misaka did the same. Mr. Misaka, who was there first, took the bottom bunk, and I was above him. I did feel a bit bad for anyone who would come after."

That "person who came after" turned out to be Mr. Niki—indeed, having been asked to wake the victim up, he ended up being the first one to discover the body, which he probably felt was beyond "a bit bad."

But still, it's awkward to have three people on one side of a six-person room's triple bunk bed—it looks like they're obviously avoiding something. And for Mr. Niki, disliking the too-close ceiling of the top bunk must have seemed like a psychological necessity. He couldn't have known that the victim was "chatty" when he crawled into the guest room, as Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura were asleep, leaving no one for the victim to talk to.

Anyhow, summarizing the testimony of the three roommates:

- The victim was the first to enter the guest room.
- The second to enter was Mr. Misaka, the third was Mr. Shimura, and the fourth was Mr. Niki. When Mr. Niki entered, Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura were already asleep.
- The victim planned to get off at the first station in the morning. He had asked Mr. Niki to wake him (but not the other two).
- The beds used were as follows: Ichikawa=right bottom bunk, Niki=right middle bunk, Misaka=left bottom bunk, Shimura=left middle bunk.

That's about it.

"Yes, that's about right. And with that much understood, it is enough to identify the perpetrator," Ms. Kyoko asserted.

It doesn't seem so to me... As a logic puzzle, it seems like there are far too few conditions. Can we fill in the missing parts with reasoning rather than imagination?

If the perpetrator acted while the victim (and the other two) were asleep, then unlike us, they had all the time in the world. It seems the crime could have been committed by anyone.

"Yes. It would be difficult to pinpoint the criminal like a logic puzzle. However, if we think not logically but psychologically, it is possible to identify them."

"Psychologically?"

"When a human kills another human, there are several psychological brakes that come into play. No matter the circumstances or the resentment, one does not easily move on impulse. It's a safety device for living in society—or should I say, to run on the rails of what we call common sense. Was it ATS? (Automatic Train Stop)"

Ms. Kyoko said this when the announcement that we would arrive at the next station in about five minutes played—as if it was the bell before class.

"The criminal is Mr. Niki, the first discoverer of the body,"

she said, based on psychological reasoning.

9

Of course, Ms. Kyoko did not point to Mr. Niki as the culprit for a simplistic reason such as "suspect the first discoverer."

Psychological reasoning.

It was, when mentioned, a most reasonable point, "Would a person kill another while a third party is present in the same room?"—Logically speaking, regardless of who is where, a person can kill another.

However, anyone would want to avoid being witnessed committing an antisocial act, and if one considers the possibility of their objective being hindered, the culprit would likely want to commit the act when alone with the intended victim.

There were four people in the room, and while the other two were asleep, the culprit bludgeoned Mr. Ichikawa—this scenario is logically possible but psychologically improbable.

Who would want to risk the sound of the blow to the back of Mr. Ichikawa's head serving as an alarm clock? If the first strike didn't kill, he could scream, he could call for help—in a shared room, there's nothing to gain from such a high-risk murder.

If there were a situation where such brakes would fail to apply, then, it would only be when there were just two people.

"... But then, that would mean the crime was impossible for anyone. The only one who had a chance to be alone with the victim was Mr. Misaka, who entered the room second... After that, Mr. Shimura and Mr. Niki joined, so,"

That could imply that the three were colluding, but since all three were meeting for the first time, that would be difficult...

"No, that's not the case, Mr. Mamoru."

"Eh... You mean it's not difficult?"

Since they were isolated in separate rooms and questioned separately, that concern should have been addressed.

"If it's a matter of difficulty, of course it's difficult. The difference is that the three of them were meeting for the first time."

"...? So, among Mr. Niki, Mr. Misaka, and Mr. Shimura, were some of them acquainted with each other beforehand...?"

"Not so,"

Ms. Kyoko raised her finger.

"There is a person who, despite being in the same room, has not faced the others. Not a first encounter, but a no encounter."

"No encounter—"

Let's see—does that exist? No, there is.

It hadn't occurred to me until she pointed it out, and if it hadn't been specified as the "culprit" beforehand, I might not have noticed, but indeed—Mr. Niki had not met either Mr. Misaka or Mr. Shimura face to face.

Conversely, Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura had met face to face when talking with the victim, Mr. Ichikawa... If we're talking about a connection with the victim, Mr. Niki had one as well, but I had been focusing only on that, overlooking the connections among the suspects themselves.

Ms. Kyoko had not overlooked that.

It was not a matter of whether there was a connection, but whether there was not—

"However, if it's not a first encounter but a no encounter, what then? I don't think that alone can identify Mr. Niki as the culprit."

"It means that Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura have not met Mr. Niki, neither before nor after the incident. What does that imply?"

"...?"

"It means impersonation. For example, Mr. Niki, having killed Mr. Ichikawa when they were alone, could pretend to be him and chat with the others."

10

Whether Ms. Kyoko's psychological deduction was correct in its aim, including the clarification of the motive, will have to wait for the results of the police investigation. However, the course of events is believed to have been roughly as follows.

First, there was a dispute between Mr. Ichikawa and Mr. Niki when they were alone in the room, resulting in Mr. Niki bludgeoning Mr. Ichikawa to death—whether it was a spontaneous or premeditated act remains unclear.

Regardless of the method, the murder was carried out through simple violence. However, Mr. Niki then schemed to conceal his crime—since it had been just the two of them, the murder was accomplished.

"Then let's pretend it wasn't just the two of us," he thought, waiting for other passengers to sneak into the cabin, and brazenly impersonating Mr. Ichikawa at that.

Pretending to be Mr. Ichikawa, he spoke to Ms. Misaka and Mr. Shimura in a chummy manner—excessively talkative, perhaps not so much to make an impression but rather because of the mental disarray caused by the extraordinary experience of committing a murder.

He set up the story so that he, that is, Mr. Nihei Niki, came to the cabin after Mr. Misaka and Mr. Shimura had fallen asleep—essentially, creating an alibi where there was never a moment when he and the victim were alone in the cabin.

Not that it would help much, but it doesn't seem like he was trying to pin the suspicion on the other two. If that were the case, he would have deliberately acted to be alone with one of them.

"But, while he was impersonating Mr. Ichikawa, what did he do with the real Mr. Ichikawa's body? He couldn't just leave it on the bed, could he?"

"The left the body on the bed. However, it was on the top bunk on the opposite side."

The top bunk on the opposite side? No, that would stand out even more—

"That would only stand out in the case of someone as large as you, Mr. Mamoru. For a person of average height, the back of the top bunk would not be visible."

"..."

So, the phenomenon that I can't see the corpse lying on the lowest bunk when I'm standing, reverses—still, isn't it too bold to leave a corpse out in the open on a bed without curtains? Even if the number of people using the cabin can be checked through the reservation site, one can't know their height—and of course, there is always the possibility of someone like me, "a large person."

"Yes. So Mr. Niki—or rather, Mr. Niki impersonating Mr. Ichikawa—would have met Ms. Misaka and Mr. Shimura while seated on the bunk. When the person you're talking to is seated, psychologically, you naturally want to align your head heights—your line of sight."

'Once seated, even you would not see the body hidden on the top bunk, Mr. Mamoru—especially if he turned his back to it while sitting', Ms. Kyoko said.

That is indeed correct.

But it's also true that this line of thinking is not logical—in my opinion, as someone not involved, it's unclear what the difference is between killing the others while they are asleep and moving the body from the top bunk on the opposite side to the bottom bunk on the diagonal during that time. Since it would involve changing the blood-splattered sheets, it would be a time-consuming task—there may be no sounds of bludgeoning or screams, but if witnessed, that would be the end.

However, once he had committed the murder, Mr. Niki might have been somewhat in despair. The way he moved the body and positioned it face down, arranging it so that even if the other two woke up before morning they would not recognize the face, suggests he wasn't completely reckless...

But the logic completely falls apart.

The only consistency is in the psychology—the psychology of the criminal.

"Yes, that's what you call abnormal psychology."

As the train continued its journey towards the final destination of V Prefecture according to the schedule, Ms. Kyoko concluded as such, but the fact that she could detect such abnormalities so quickly might mean that the psychology of the "Forgetful Detective" is not quite normal either. At least, not normal enough that I have to protect her. In any case, Ms. Kyoko's journey had just begun, and more so, the future seemed to be worrisome.

[redacted]

第二枚

山麓（さんろく）オーベルジュ『ゆきどけ』

[redacted]

Ch 2: Mountain Base Auberge “Yukidoke”

0

I am Kyoko Okitegami, the Forgetful Detective. Twenty-five years old.

My memory resets every day.

Currently on a business trip.

2

"Ms. Kyoko, being the master detective that you are, I suspect you don't place much emphasis on the motive behind a crime, do you?"

In the inn where we were staying, we happened to share a table with a distinguished old gentleman who, upon receiving a business card from my employer and learning her title—Director of the Okitegami Detective Agency—began, not quite provocatively but with a challenging nuance.

Of course, she's not the sort of forgetful detective who would readily rise to such bait,' and the white-haired lady responded with a calm smile:

"Oh no, not at all. Detective novels have a culture of 'whydunit,' you know. I do recognize that the motive for a crime is an important element of the case."

"Whydunit, you say. But even so, in the investigative process, within the '5W1H,' the ranking of 'WHY' tends to fall to the bottom, doesn't it?"

The old gentleman wouldn't back down.

Though his tone suggested he was amused by the exchange with the detective, it seemed that he hadn't brought up the topic on a whim.

"Well, yes, that is so. Relatively speaking, I can't say that it's a high priority,"

Ms. Kyoko seemed uncertain whether to continue the topic, likely pondering whether this conversation related to her journey's purpose—the business activities noted in the memorandum on her right arm.

As a bodyguard accompanying her, I was inclined to observe the situation a bit longer—indeed, I thought the old gentleman's point was valid.

5W1H.

When, where, who, why, what, how.

In Japanese, this is sometimes called the "when-where game," a concept that also forms the basic criteria of mystery—it is only when all these questions are appropriately answered that a master detective can proudly declare a case solved (or in Ms. Kyoko's style, "I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning").

"When" and "where" relate to alibis, the presence or absence at the crime scene; "who" is obviously about identifying the culprit, the mainstay and theme of detective novels.

"What" and "how" are the question marks for revealing the trick, indispensable elements as well—but what about "why"?

Motive. Purpose. Motivation.

One could call it what they like, but to speak candidly without fear of misunderstanding, this aspect could be a trap that might ensnare a detective if they focus solely on it.

"'Whydunit' ultimately equates to 'an unexpected motive,' and, moreover, 'motiveless murder' has become something of a trend lately,"

Ms. Kyoko stated a general opinion, seemingly deciding to wait and see for the moment—although, as a forgetful detective, her reference to a "recent trend" might actually be quite outdated by now. Nevertheless, it's not as if "motiveless murders" have ceased to exist in society.

Therefore, perhaps the motive is something to be proudly revealed by the true perpetrator after they have been unmasked—a golden rule for master detectives, one might say.

Indeed, there's no shortage of famed detectives who boldly claim, "I'm not interested in the motive or the background of the crime. Solving the mystery is all that matters to me."

"Simply having a motive doesn't make one the culprit; Mr. A might have a motive, but Mr. B has a stronger one, making him more suspicious; Mr. C has no motive, thus cannot be the criminal—detectives don't think like that, do they? Or, on the contrary, it is even common to argue that 'having a motive makes one less suspicious' or 'having no motive is exactly what makes one suspicious'," said the elderly gentleman, his words not letting her get a word in edgewise before he suddenly paused, as if realizing it, and then with an 'oh, my apologies,' he bowed his head.

"It's not that I'm saying it's 'bad,' just that I find the difference fascinating. I've long thought it's a subject I'd like to explore if I ever meet a detective."

"'The difference is fascinating,' you say?" Ms. Kyoko inquired, her tone suggesting she was intrigued by the suggestive phrasing.

"I've been late in returning your business card—this is who I am," the elderly gentleman remarked, handing back his business card he retrieved from his pocket to Ms. Kyoko. His name was written there, along with a title that involuntarily made one want to slap their knee in realization.

"Ah, so you are a judge," Ms. Kyoko said, nodding with understanding.

"Then—the most important thing for you would be the motive, wouldn't it?"

2

Ms. Kyoko spoke of the four levels to the real pleasure of traveling while dragging me across the nation as her bodyguard and porter, claiming it was for the promotional activities of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

"The first level, of course, is visiting tourist spots. Directly encountering famous temples and shrines offers much to gain—the second level is enjoying the journey itself. The tension rises just from long-distance travel by train, bus, or plane. It can also be interesting to travel on foot. Sometimes the preparations for a trip the day before can be more enjoyable than the trip itself—a contraposition to 'there's no place like home,' I suppose."

I understood the first and second levels without needing them to be explained, as they are quite straightforward and I could relate to them through personal experience. However, what could be the third and fourth levels? Not being well-traveled, I had no clue.

"The third level is 'who you travel with.' Whether it's with family, friends, or a lover, the nature of the trip changes completely with each—of course, solo travel has its own charm."

Indeed.

Undoubtedly, traveling with the forgetful detective Ms. Kyoko would offer a unique experience I couldn't find elsewhere—but what about the fourth level, the piece de resistance?

"Yes. It's a delight that is often overlooked. However, it's a delight that you will never experience in mere transit," Ms. Kyoko prefaced before continuing.

"The fourth delight of travel, Mr. Mamoru, is meeting fellow travelers."

...As previously mentioned, not being accustomed to travel, even with the answer presented to me, I honestly didn't quite grasp it. However, now, having incidentally shared a table with the elderly gentleman, another guest at our lodging, and having this conversation, I belatedly understood the meaning of the words Ms. Kyoko had said on our departure day—although, due to her forgetful nature, Ms. Kyoko had already forgotten she had said them.

A judge.

I had previously heard that he was staying at this auberge for his hobby of mountain climbing, and indeed, the old gentleman had the build of a mountaineer, though his profession was unexpected.

The sphere of activities may seem close to that of a detective, yet in reality, they seldom intersect—while they may operate in close quarters, their active periods are distinctly different.

For most detectives, identifying the true criminal marks the end of their job—you'd never hear of a detective attending the trial of the true criminal.

And even more so for the forgetful detective.

In most cases, famous detectives, who are not public figures, rarely appear in court as witnesses... Therefore, the relationship between a detective and a judge is not an obvious rivalry or a conflicting structure like that between a detective and a police officer... They are neatly misaligned.

Moreover, it would be unthinkable for a judge to request a detective to solve a case–therefore, it might have been impossible for these two titles to encounter each other if not as "travelers" who happened to come in contact with each other on a journey.

Of course, for Ms. Kyoko, it was a "that's precisely it" moment, or rather, an active pursuit of such coincidences as part of her business strategy, and the forgetful detective, who had been eating with relish the French cuisine at the inn (I knew she was a fashionista, but she seems to be quite the foodie, too), finally placed her fork and knife on her plate.

Upon learning of her counterpart's profession, Ms. Kyoko might have switched from casual conversation mode to full-on business mode–as if she had struck a chord.

Or perhaps her purse's strings.

Whether the elderly gentleman–the judge–was aware of Ms. Kyoko's shift or not, he continued.

"For a famous detective, the basic stance is 'no matter the motive, a crime is a crime,' right?... However, for a judge, there are motives to consider and motives to dismiss. Of course, I'm not

saying that only motives and backgrounds matter. However, even if it's the same crime, the most important thing is 'why' the perpetrator committed the crime."

"Taking the extenuating circumstances into consideration?" Ms. Kyoko interjected.

"Precisely," nodded the elderly gentleman.

"No matter the circumstances, what's done is done–a crime is a crime, and an offence is an offence. The motive doesn't usually change the trick. Therefore, the stance of a famous detective is correct in the midst of an investigation. However, when it comes to post-investigation procedures that a judge handles, it's a different story. A murder for money and a murder out of spite are the same crime, but they're entirely different in nature."

The way the old gentleman spoke seemed somewhat rough in its logic, but it's true to some extent that detectives do not distinguish between criminals or crimes based on motive.

Solving mysteries is the job of a famous detective, not judging people–at least Ms. Kyoko is not the type of detective who preaches at length to the perpetrator in the resolution.

Judges are different.

In a sense, lecturing the culprit is their job–it's not possible without making the uncovering of motives a supreme goal.

I had a vague impression that a trial was a systematic procedure, but hearing it directly from someone who works as a judge changes that impression drastically.

"Whether it's five years of hard labor, ten years, or whether probation should be granted. Or even... whether to impose the death penalty."

"..."

"It shouldn’t happen that someone is excused because they have a motive-but it cannot be said categorically that even if they have a motive, they cannot be excused."

Rather than "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas", perhaps being so far away from home had loosened the judge's lips, making him reveal his inner thoughts like this.

"It's enlightening," Ms. Kyoko agreed, seemingly genuinely.

She wore a business smile within a business smile, so how much she really agreed was unclear, and even if she was enlightened, she'd probably forget by tomorrow.

"As you say, uncovering motives is perhaps a mystery that we detectives tend to overlook. Why people commit crimes, the real reason is something only the person themselves would know–and sometimes, they might not even understand it themselves."

The "I did it in a fit of anger" type.

It sounds like a cliché, but while it seems to explain nothing, the term "fit of anger" might be the most accurate description of the motive behind a crime.

"There are motives that may be compelling to the person themselves, but completely incomprehensible to the rest of the world-'because the sun was yellow', for example."

"...Speaking of incomprehensible motives."

And so.

At this point, the traveling judge adopted a more serious tone, shedding his previously light-hearted manner.

"Ms. Kyoko, are you aware of this murder case? It's not about an 'unexpected motive,' nor is it a 'motiveless murder'—rather, it's what you might call a 'negative motive murder.'"

A negative motive murder? That's an odd name. Both in writing and in its meaning... Negative?

"What could that be? Perhaps I might know it."

Ms. Kyoko leaned forward, intrigued.

Even if she knew, she would have long forgotten by now.

3

"Just as detectives have, judges too are bound by confidentiality, so I'm not at liberty to divulge too much. However, since it's been reported in the media and is public knowledge, and as it's anonymous, there should be no issue—whatever we discuss will be reset by tomorrow?

"A forgetful detective?

"Oho. How interesting that you should say so. Then there's even less of a problem.

"The structure of the case itself is quite simple. A high school senior brother murdered his fifth-grade sister—a tragedy that makes you want to cover your eyes.

"If you'd prefer not to hear any more at this point, I'll stop—but you seem quite intrigued.

"As expected of a renowned detective, you're tough.

"In fact, it was a famous detective who solved this murder case—a private detective who had been hired by the parents, who worked in cooperation with the police to deduce and brilliantly identify the true perpetrator.

"The parents would never have imagined that the person who killed their daughter was their son—I'm wondering if the detective were paid their full retainer.

"But that aside.

"The trick that was used, what was it called again, if I reveal it, involved the high school senior brother using an alibi trick when he killed his sister.

"At the time of the sister's murder, the brother was in the middle of a university entrance exam—taking a fallback option, so it seemed impossible that he could have committed the crime.

"Who, where, when, what, how.

"Indeed.

"However, with the meticulous reasoning of an experienced detective, the hidden truth was uncovered—wicked deeds cannot be concealed. On that day, at that time, it was not the brother who was taking the exam but someone else, and he had slipped out of the venue to commit the act upon his sister.

"If you look only at the result, it was a very simple trick—frankly, it seems like something that could have been discovered through normal police investigation.

"So why was the presence of a detective imperative to uncover this seemingly childish trick? Because the brother had absolutely no motive to kill his real sister.

"They were not at odds, not estranged, not constantly fighting.

"None of those considerations seemed relevant—on the contrary, they were said to be a very close brother and sister. He didn't hesitate to call her his beloved sister.

"That's what I mean by 'negative motive.'

"It was such a deep bond that, when the sister was murdered, no one thought to question the grieving brother's alibi—not until the detective did.

"For the detective, who has a unique perspective, the lack of motive... the negative motive, made the brother suspect. I'm not being ironic, but it's a very detective-like approach.

"And that was the correct one, the truth. Once that perspective was taken, the evidence just fell into place.

"Thus, there were no issues with the arrest, remand, or indictment—however, when it came to the court proceedings that followed, a significant obstacle remained.

"Why did he kill?

"Why did the brother kill his sister?

"You can't give an accurate verdict until the 'whydunit', as you call it, Ms. Kyoko, is resolved.

"It's not as if I'm trying to emulate a master detective, but I've entertained suspicions like maybe they only appeared to be a close brother and sister on the surface and actually hated each other, or that their affection ran so deep it turned into hatred, or that their love spiraled out of control. Given that the defendant was a minor, the prosecutors and defense attorneys also tried to dig deeply into the matter—but to speak from the conclusion, no such circumstances were found, no matter how deep they dug.

"Instead, what was unearthed was the siblings' closeness. The more the investigation progressed, the stronger the impression that the brother was unlikely to have killed his sister... I even began to suspect a wrongful arrest.

"Thinking it was a wrongful arrest might be overthinking it, but could it have been an accident? Could it be that he didn't mean to kill her?

"However, considering he went as far as to create an alibi, there's no way it was an accident or negligence.....

"How does the defendant himself explain this point, you ask? That too is ambiguous—or should I say, unclear. It's as if he's hiding something, yet it could simply be that he has nothing to say, maintaining his silence.

"He appears to be confused and at a loss for words—of course, the defendant is entitled to the right to remain silent, so we cannot simply suspect him because he chooses not to testify.

"However, according to friends of the defendant, he doesn't seem like the type to commit a crime out of irritation—rather, he was a serious, maybe even too serious, exam student.

"With such a reputation, in the end, we came to a rather flimsy conclusion that he killed his sister in a fit of stress from the exams.

"There's no doubt that the brother's grades had plateaued during crunch time, and so we had to make that judgment—but still, we weren't completely satisfied.

"It's almost as if we chose a motive by a process of elimination.

"Even if every other mystery is solved.

"When, where, who, what, and how are thoroughly explained—yet, why did he kill?

"The mystery that the detective shelved remains forever unsolved, and the verdict was rendered."

4

When asked, it seemed to be more of a dark mystery of the heart than a murder mystery—however, it certainly was beyond the usual domain of a detective.

The private detective in charge of the case hadn't left his work half-finished or abandoned his reasoning halfway through—his job as a master detective ended once he revealed the alibi trick and identified the perpetrator.

Everything after that is the domain of the police, prosecutors, defense attorneys—and the judge.

The master detective who declares he has no interest in motives may be somewhat cynical, but detectives have no right to step into the perpetrator's mind—let alone the darkness of their heart.

That could lead to prejudice.

"To say more, originally detectives don't even have the right to investigate cases, do they?"

Ms. Kyoko said something quite blunt.

"After all, we can only act upon receiving a request. So, if the request from the parents had included uncovering the motive behind the crime, surely that master detective would have done so—but well, even in that case, I would have refrained from commenting."

'Defendants aren't the only ones with the right to remain silent'—Ms. Kyoko continued.

"Hmm... the right to remain silent, that's quite an unusual way to put it. You make it sound as if you know the motive for the crime just from what you've just said," remarked the judge, casting a skeptical glance at Ms. Kyoko.

In response, Ms. Kyoko replied with an unmoved expression, "It's not that I understood the motive from this conversation alone, but rather, from this conversation, there is no other way to interpret it."

Her expression unmoved—or rather, picking up a fork and knife, it was actually moving as she had resumed eating at some point, seemingly having lost interest in the judge's anecdote.

"One would surmise that the renowned detective who led this case to a resolution had a fair guess about it, wouldn't you say? Perhaps that detective was me, though I have forgotten. As you correctly pointed out, like any other detective, I belong to a profession prone to such twisted thinking—or should I say, it's a professional hazard."

Such twisted thinking.

Could it mean that having a motive makes one less likely to be the culprit, or that not having a motive makes one more suspicious?

This seems more like the reasoning of a mystery novel reader than that of a detective, but then again, there might not be a significant difference between the two.

If the case were a detective novel, then certainly, the information that "the victim was dearly loved by her real brother" would be enough to sow the seeds of suspicion and potentially harbor crime. However, what Ms. Kyoko mentioned here didn't seem to carry such a common interpretation.

"Even if there was no motive to kill the sister, couldn't there have been another motive?" said the forgetful detective.

No, this is not a statement from a detective.

It's strictly from a traveler.

A judge and a famous detective happened to share a table, engaging in a nonchalant and vague conversation.

"Another motive? What do you mean?"

"Yes. Not an 'unexpected motive' or a 'motiveless murder,' and certainly not a 'killing out of frustration'—just a typical, commonplace motive for the crime. Perhaps you'd like to hear my conjecture?"

"Well—yes."

The judge nodded but seemed hesitant—understandably so, as the case had already been judged, and it wouldn't be desirable to draw any conclusions here that could overturn the established facts of the case.

No guardian of the law hoping for a retrial would emerge from such casual conversation during a journey—anticipating the judge's inner thoughts, Ms. Kyoko reassured him, "Don't worry. There will be no sudden plot twists. The deduction is solely about the motive—the culprit remains the same, as do the time of the crime, the crime scene, the victim, and the trick. The 4Ws and 1H remain unchanged... I'm sure that the sentence will be no different. So please, feel free to listen to the outsider perspective of a detective who doesn't specialize in uncovering motives."

Though Ms. Kyoko spoke modestly, she probably added in her mind:

"Just listen for reference—and if you are satisfied, I would appreciate it if you could spread some good words about Okitegami Detective Agency in the world of justice."

This was a business solicitation.

Even so, whether it was understood as the statement of a traveler or the promotion of her office, it seemed to have reached the judge, who appeared to have made up his mind, saying, "Understood. If that's the case."

It could be seen as a defeat to curiosity.

The judge may have been caught up in the interest of the case itself, but he was also intrigued to find out what kind of answer would emerge when a detective, who should not primarily focus on the motive, does focus solely on that aspect.

"Let's hear it, Ms. Kyoko. In this case, why did the defendant, a brother who got along well with his sister, kill her?"

"That's because he got along well with his sister."

The audience, who had been anticipating the sharp words of a master detective that would unravel all the mysteries down to their last detail, was faced with a motive for the crime articulated by Ms. Kyoko that was utterly inscrutable.

"I apologize, it was a bit confusing, wasn't it? Well, when we detectives engage in these kinds of Zen-like riddles, it's usually because we mean to sound cryptic.

"But in this case, there's simply no other way to describe it—the brother killed his sister because they were close.

"Look at it from a different angle: if they had been on bad terms, say, if they had hated each other, then it's likely the brother wouldn't have thought to kill her—in that scenario, the victim would have been someone else, I surmise.

"You can deduce so.

"Indeed, based on the brief of the case you've given me, the reason why a high school senior killed his fifth-grade sister is completely beyond us—there seems to be no apparent motive for the crime.

"Therefore, with the defendant remaining silent, it was probably inevitable that the trial would conclude with the motive unexplained, and I don't believe that was a mistake... If you are troubled by the verdict you reached on that point, then let me say that first.

"However, I want to emphasize here that this perpetrator's motive is unclear only with respect to the murder.

"Didn't you notice? The summary of the case you just gave me contains another serious crime—hidden behind the heinous act of murder, yet a significant wrongdoing was committed, don't you see?

"Yes, that's right.

"The high school senior, who is the defendant, was engaged in an alibi trickery, wasn't he?

"Yes. This too is a significant crime.

"You seem to be asking what's the big deal with that. Do you think it's a minor issue compared to the murder? But in today's society—or rather, what seems like the future to me—the success or failure of an exam, the outcome of entrance tests, is by no means an exaggeration to say it's a matter of life and death.

"It may not be life, but it certainly concerns one's future life.

"No matter how foolish it seems, getting into the school of one's choice can be a life-defining event, and it's not an exaggeration to say it's a matter of life and death—there may even be students who would kill to pass, you know.

"Eh? Killing the sister doesn't guarantee passing college, does it? Of course not—that's not what I'm saying. What are you talking about?

"It's not directly connected in that way. The truth is—oh, it's a deduction, isn't it—it's much more simplistic.

"It's simplistic, just a simple reversal of cause and effect.

"He didn't take the substitute exam in order to kill his sister—

"—he killed his sister in order to take the substitute exam.

"He created a motive for the substitute exam.

"The defendant, who was a serious, perhaps overly serious student, was struggling to improve his grades, as the numbers showed, but his pride wouldn't allow him to take a substitute exam just because 'he couldn't study.'

"To perform a substitute exam, he desperately needed another motive—a motive that was as compelling, critical, and irreplaceable as possible.

"Compelling, critical, and irreplaceable.

"That would be his dearly beloved sister, of course.

"It's noteworthy that the substitute exam was taken for a safety school, not his first-choice university—why did he perform the substitute exam at a safety school instead of the top choice university?

"If he was going to do it—if he was going to kill, that timing would have been just as good... However, while this does cause some discomfort, it's not so incomprehensible.

"It's self-evident if you follow the order of events.

"If there had been no 'motive to kill the sister,' he would have had no choice but to take the safety school entrance exam himself, and there was no denying the possibility that he might not pass... at least the defendant did not feel confident in passing.

"However, if he failed the safety school and then attempted to take the entrance exam for his first-choice school using a proxy, even if he tried to disguise it with an alibi trick, the risk of his true motives being exposed would increase significantly—although in reality, it might not be much different, but for the person about to commit such a guilty act, they would want to minimize the risk.

"The motive is—wanting to hide the complex, isn't it?

"So, the proxy exam—the act of murder—had to be carried out during the safety school entrance exam.

"However, as you've noticed, this means that when it comes to taking the entrance exam for the university of his first choice, he has no choice but to face it with his own abilities—by that time, his beloved sister would no longer be in this world. There would be no sister left to kill.

"Isn't this the whole point?

"Actually, it's not.

"Having a 'beloved sister killed by someone' and being gone from this world is a sufficient reason for failing an all-important exam.

"Or as a motive for abandoning the exam.

"It is sufficient, indeed.

"If he passes on his own merit, that's fine, and if he fails—which is highly likely—then he can attribute the failure to the murder of his beloved sister.

"It's a motive filled with the potential for sympathetic consideration, something that everyone would understand."

6

Whether Ms. Kyoko's reasoning, which she explained to the judge, was close to the truth of the case is, indeed, uncertain—just how seriously she was speaking about such a wildly implausible "motive" and "motive creation" is also unclear, and at least the judge seemed to admire Ms. Kyoko's outlandish ideas and generously offered words of praise, but he seemed to take it all as a joke suitable for an alcohol-fueled dinner conversation.

In that case, it would probably be considered a failure in terms of the office's business activities—yet, even so, Ms. Kyoko didn't seem to be discouraged by that failure.

Watching such an employer, I, her bodyguard, think.

Perhaps the purpose of this ongoing bizarre journey, which is ostensibly to promote the 'Forgetful Detective,' is just a pretext, and the real motive that everyone can accept is that Ms. Kyoko simply wants to enjoy an aimless trip to her heart's content.

Even if it doesn't remain in her memories.

[redacted]

第三枚　高速艇『スピードウェーヴ』

[redacted]

Ch 3: High Speed Boat “Speed Wave”

0

I am Kyoko Okitegami. Twenty-five years old.

Head of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

The Forgetful Detective whose memory resets every day.

Currently, on a business trip.

1

Upon mentioning that we encountered a murder case aboard a ship, one might imagine—what could it be—a massive, luxurious cruise ship, tens of thousands of tons in weight, on a grand voyage around the world, with passengers dressed up for a gala party, engaging in a locked-room murder mystery in a suite with a balcony overlooking the sea—such a glamorous scenario comes to mind. However, the incident that Kyoko Okitegami, the Forgetful Detective, encountered was not of that nature, and to begin with, the ship we boarded was not that kind of vessel.

After all, the voyage time was a mere thirty minutes or less.

We were headed to a small, sparsely populated island called "Shokeijima," not on a passenger ship, but on a public transport vessel that made two round trips a day, morning and evening, with only fifty passengers allowed onboard upon purchasing a ticket. The crew consisted solely of the captain and the first mate, a small boat—though it was given the fancy name "Speed Wave," my first impression at the port was that it was a "rusty lump of iron strangely afloat at sea." What kind of repurposing is this ship undergoing?

This too was a part of the Forgetful Detective's business activities, hoping that heading to this island ("Execution Island") with a name that sounds like something out of a Yokomizo Seishi mystery might lead to an encounter with some incident. However, Ms. Kyoko's plan, to speak of the result, was greatly mistaken.

Because the incident occurred during that short voyage of less than thirty minutes before we even arrived at the island.

"The right to arrest on the high seas also belongs to the captain, I hear—it's said that this is true not only for ships but also for spacecraft. The captain's authority is that strong. It's essentially an 'order from the captain.' As someone who prides himself on being a detective, I would like to

solve a murder case aboard a spaceship one day," said the white-haired detective, speaking of a future plan that seemed like a dream or perhaps an unrealistic hope. However, for a Forgetful Detective whose memory resets every day, a future plan is almost non-existent.

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

No matter what case she handles, she will completely forget the memories related to that case—the investigative information, the truth, the real culprit—when she wakes up the next day, a detective with an absolute duty of confidentiality by necessity.

To put it extremely, one cannot definitively say that she has never been entrusted with and handled a murder case that occurred on a spaceship in the past.

Ms. Kyoko, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, dressed without a single gap in fashionable attire, it's hard to believe she would hire a useless man like me as a bodyguard. Surely, she would also manage to look good in a spacesuit.

However, for now—or rather, for today, Ms. Kyoko is on board a small boat that connects between remote islands, which you could swim across if one tried hard enough.

There isn't even a seat for passengers.

There's just a wide-open communal sleeping space on the deck below, like going downstairs to a basement—while it could be described as a neat space, it might be more accurate to say there's nothing there at all.

There isn't even a window.

It's like the space on a fishing boat where one would throw in the catch, like tuna, to freeze—although tuna is not a small fish, one might wonder if such a ship, cramming fifty people into such a space, is really allowed to sail under modern law?

From departure to arrival, the journey is just under thirty minutes, but to be honest, for someone with a weak mental constitution like me, it is an intolerable space of stress—although Ms. Kyoko seems nonchalantly content.

The "Shokeijima" toward which the ship was headed was not a tourist destination, so most of the passengers were likely islanders or their associates. It could have been that the clearly out-of-place Ms. Kyoko and I, her accompaniment, would receive curious looks that were not at all concealed or even attempted to be hidden—but surprisingly, that was not the case. Everyone seemed to have no particular interest in us and were crammed together, lying down haphazardly.

It appears that people's indifference to their surroundings is not exclusive to the metropolitan area.

Beautiful women and giants are just part of the scenery, huh?

My penny-pinching employer seems to want to experience the world of Seishi Yokomizo as part of a long-term PR campaign, even if it's in poor taste. However, at this rate, it seems unlikely that a murder case spurred by messy human relationships would occur on such a ominously named, isolated island—a relief to the chest that would be characteristic of a member of the fastest detective agency run by the quickest detective.

All of a sudden, out of the blue, abruptly.

Ms. Kyoko, who had been pleasantly sharing trivial facts about the voyage, maintained her dignity and kept her knees together even in the sleeping area (well, even if it was a sleeping area, it would be a problem if she literally slept there like other guests. Not just a matter of dignity, but even just taking a nap would cause Ms. Kyoko to lose her memory of what she had done before). Without any forewarning, she tightened her expression and stood up quickly.

3

Ms. Kyoko didn't just stand up; she suddenly started running—dashing through the space occupied by the reclining passengers without a word.

In silence.

This unexplained but characteristic behavior of a master detective did manage to attract the attention of everyone in the cabin. However, if I were to become flustered and unable to move now, I would not be fit to be Ms. Kyoko's bodyguard.

My job is simply to protect.

Even without being given an explanation, even if I cannot grasp the situation, if Ms. Kyoko moves, I reflexively follow her as if tethered by a rope.

Thinking is not my job. I am not a detective's assistant, let alone a master detective.

If, hypothetically, Ms. Kyoko spotted a mermaid in the sea and decided to dive in, it would be my duty to dive in with her—though, again, there are no windows in that cabin, so unless she has clairvoyance, it'd be impossible for her to spot mermaids or sea monks.

However, it seemed that even without clairvoyant abilities, having superb deductive skills could allow one to notice an anomaly even in such an isolated space—Ms. Kyoko, maintaining top

speed or rather increasing it, dashed out of the cabin and continued her momentum up the rusted staircase.

The iron staircase, so corroded by the salty sea breeze that it seemed to be coated in that color as a result, seemed in danger of collapsing due to her acceleration. But hesitation and failure to follow her was not an option for me—I am a bodyguard, after all.

"Mr. Mamoru!"

At the top of the not-so-long staircase, Ms. Kyoko finally stopped and turned around, calling my name almost like a shout.

And then she made an unreasonable request, typical of a boss who is unconcerned with modern corporate compliance due to her (forgetful detective) nature.

"Please kick down this door!"

The steel door she indicated had a plate attached to it that read "Steering Room"—the "Steering Room"?

I wondered if she was mistaking me for a member of the FBI's raid team or something (a handwritten memorandum on her right arm should neatly read: 'Mamoru Oyagiri. Bodyguard'). But regardless, I wasn't in a position to refuse Ms. Kyoko's orders, even if she had suddenly decided to plot a hijacking.

However, I couldn't help but attempt minimal resistance—instructed to kick it down, the door seemed to be outward-opening. It might be quicker to pull it from this side rather than kick it down.

As I grasped the knob, I naturally felt the resistance of a lock (of course, Ms. Kyoko had undoubtedly checked whether it was locked before giving me such an unreasonable task), but fortunately, like all other parts of the ship's body, the door was covered in a reddish-brown rust—it might have been possible to kick it down as instructed, but I stuck to the plan and pulled on the knob with all my might.

It came off. From the hinge side.

I almost found myself under the heavy iron door I had pulled out, but without paying any attention to me (no thanks or words of appreciation. She's a traditional employer, after all), Ms. Kyoko leaped into the wheelhouse.

There was no point in refraining from further destruction now, the damage was done, but instead of throwing away the torn-off door, I leaned it gently against a nearby wall (though it was

probably no longer usable), and followed Ms. Kyoko into the cramped wheelhouse—finally understanding her intention.

Inside the wheelhouse.

Two men—the captain and the first officer—had been killed.

4

A speedboat. The wheelhouse. The death of two crew members (the entire crew).

This made it clear why Ms. Kyoko had suddenly burst out of the cabin—more than twenty minutes had passed since we'd set sail, and it was about time to start reducing speed for entering port, yet the ship was still moving forward at an unabated pace; she must have sensed that keenly.

In a communal sleeping area without windows, it would be considerably difficult to feel this without looking at a clock, but Ms. Kyoko is the Forgetful Detective.

Not only is she a professional at "mysteries" and "deductions," but also at "speed" and "time"—she must have had an intuition that something was wrong with the wheelhouse, or more precisely, with the ship's crew.

"I had assumed something like both of them having simultaneous heart attacks," Ms. Kyoko finally offered that much of an explanation, but without even glancing at the two dead bodies, she impolitely and ungracefully stepped over them and reached for the ship's helm.

Ms. Kyoko, who remained unflustered by gruesome corpses or bloody murder scenes, thinking "I'll forget it all by tomorrow anyway," was unfazed even in this situation. But even I might have acted the same under these circumstances.

Because through the wheelhouse's front window, I could see the island's port—it was right there. Without anyone to steer, if the speedboat continued its full-speed-ahead course, a collision was inevitable.

It was inevitable—that is.

The collision—or rather, the violent crash was imminent.

"M—Ms. Kyoko!"

But when I say I might have acted the same, the most I, a power character, could do was tear off iron doors... I'm no Superman, I had no idea how to slow down the ship.

If I turned the helm, sure, it might veer off course, but I couldn't be certain which way to turn it... Logically, if you turn it left, you'd think it would go left, but I've heard that when you row a canoe, if you paddle on the left, it turns right.

In a panic, I'd likely end up doing nothing at all. Even if I couldn't do anything, I had to try something; the lives of all fifty passengers were at stake.

As I might say, it's a ship that feels like it could sink without an accident—a rust ship, not a mud boat. I doubted it could withstand the impact of a head-on collision with a concrete-reinforced quay—not to mention whether, in compliance with the law, there were enough life jackets for everyone on board.

If I only thought about saving my own life, jumping into the sea right now might seem like it would increase my chances of survival—but it appeared that in front of Ms. Kyoko, who encompassed all possibilities, that option did not exist.

Whether by guesswork or a hunch, Ms. Kyoko, with incredible efficiency or perhaps reckless courage, but at least with no hesitation, turned the wheel. But she wasn't satisfied with just that; she pulled levers, pressed buttons, activated the radio, and managed around five or six operations simultaneously. While doing so, she smoothly changed the course of the speedboat and slowed it down.

No, perhaps it wasn't going smoothly.

Of course, for someone like Ms. Kyoko, who neither retains memories nor accumulates knowledge, handling an old boat would likely be more advantageous than facing a cockpit controlled by the latest computers.

However, that didn't mean I could believe that Ms. Kyoko had a boating license, and probably, she was making many mistakes at this moment. Yet, she didn't stop at all and continued steering.

Trial and error.

As a result, Ms. Kyoko achieved the fastest deceleration–the boat turned at such a sharp angle that it seemed it could snap in half in the middle, and it stopped at a speed that made me worry it could flip over.

If this had been a car on a road, I couldn't imagine how long the skid marks would have been from such a violent, spin-like emergency stop–of course, it was an emergency stop that could only be done because it was the obstacle-free sea.

During all this, I could do nothing but stand there; at least we managed to avoid crashing into Shokeijima. However, it was still (once again) too early to wipe the cold sweat off my forehead.

The boat stopped, but Ms. Kyoko did not.

"What are you dawdling for, Mr. Mamoru!"

I got scolded.

Even though I hadn't yet been praised for my feat of ripping off the iron door just moments ago.

Truly, this person was not suited to employing subordinates—but as a superior, even if she was wrong, her scolding, as a human being, was not incorrect.

After steering, Ms. Kyoko moved on to the captain and first officer she had nimbly leaped over earlier–the two lying corpses.

"We'll start the life-saving operations!"

No.

They were not dead yet.

5

Indeed, the two crew members were brought back from the brink.

To be precise, both had been in a state of cardiac arrest, but Ms. Kyoko's emergency medical treatment, which she performed on both simultaneously, was successful–their consciousness hadn't returned yet, and without the results of further tests, we couldn't be sure they wouldn't suffer aftereffects, but still, she had succeeded in pulling them back from the brink of crossing the Styx.

As for steering the ship, well, that was one thing, but I had been witness to Ms. Kyoko's life-saving skills on several occasions before, so I wasn't surprised this time (which is why I could assist somewhat efficiently with the task this time. And although I didn't know about the life jackets, the ship was equipped with an emergency medical kit and a defibrillator), yet still, to be involved in such trouble even before arriving at the desolate island with the unspeakable name, Ms. Kyoko's detective qualities were indeed something formidable.

She did need a bodyguard.

"But that doesn't change the fact that running amok like that was reckless—ripping off doors and such. What were you planning to do if nothing had happened?"

"It wasn't me who ripped it off. Please stop trying to pin this on me. There's no way these thin arms could do such a thing."

After taking a breath, I rebuked Ms. Kyoko as her subordinate and that was the response I got back-if she was even thinking of shifting responsibility like that even in this situation, it was frightening.

It was probably a light-hearted remark to show that she was back to her usual self, but if that was true, I better start looking for my next job right away.

Well, all's well that ends well, I guess.

Even if Ms. Kyoko's perception of no change in speed was a mere misunderstanding, if nothing had occurred in the wheelhouse and the captain and the first officer were unharmed, then there was no problem—in fact, it was a job well done preventing a major accident and successfully rescuing lives.

Therefore, for the business operations of the Okitegami Detective Agency, this incident provided more than enough value for her services.

"Alright then, Mr. Mamoru, shall we return to our main profession?" said our agency's director, insatiably eager for economic pursuits.

"After communicating via radio earlier, it seems it will be about thirty minutes until the police arrive for rescue—to this stranded ship at sea. I've also finished broadcasting to the cabins, so let's resolve this locked-room murder case before they arrive,"

'Technically, it's a locked-room attempted murder', Ms. Kyoko corrected.

Merely transforming a murder into an attempted murder is surely enough to fulfill one's duty as a master detective, but it seems that preserving the crime scene alone isn't satisfying enough for her.

Ms. Kyoko didn't seem content to just wait for the local police—or in this case, perhaps the Coast Guard—to arrive, and immediately began,

"The captain's name is—and the first officer's name is—hmm, I see,"

She started gathering personal information from a binder propped up on the shelf in the wheelhouse.

Such an action was also performed at utmost speed.

"Both 'causes of death' is 'blunt force trauma'—though neither is dead nor murdered. The captain was struck in the head from behind, and the first officer received a strong blow to the forehead from the front. As for the murder weapon, it's quite clear without needing to examine it—it's that paperweight lying over there,"

With the emergency team yet to arrive, it seemed improper to move the two men, so they were laid down on the floor of the wheelhouse, aligned side by side—using our jackets as makeshift beds and pillows.

Until now, I hadn't been able to distinguish which one was the captain and which was the first officer, but from now on, it seemed possible to tell them apart by the location of their "fatal wounds."

Ms. Kyoko turned her attention to the paperweight that served as the murder weapon.

Despite already having broken down the door and wildly turned the wheel, it wasn't a situation to worry about fingerprints anymore, but even Ms. Kyoko, who could be considered quite indifferent, did not attempt to pick up the murder weapon with her bare hands.

It was an anchor-shaped paperweight.

A shiny, mirror-finished paperweight that looked out of place on an old ship, whether it was used to hold papers in the rocking boat or just an ornament.

"This looks like it'll yield some good fingerprints. Clear as if it were a mobile phone screen—but what's this?"

Ms. Kyoko, careful not to touch the paperweight itself, crouched down on the floor, peering at the murder weapon in a scrutinizing posture.

Had she discovered some distinctive fingerprints?

Yet, it was hard to imagine that a criminal capable of such a locked-room murder—especially one that could be considered inviolable at sea—would leave fingerprints on the weapon.

After completing the rescue, Ms. Kyoko first made an announcement over the ship's intercom asking, "Is there a doctor among the passengers?" (there wasn't), and then commanded everyone to stay put in their cabins (despite not having the authority to do so). She likely considered that among the approximately fifty people, the perpetrator might be there—all passengers were suspects.

The wheelhouse was locked from the inside.

Inside, there were two "bludgeoned bodies" (though they were no longer dead).

Indeed, the door was of such poor quality that it seemed it could be torn off with a strong pull, almost as if it had rusted away completely, but it was not as if a gaping hole had been left open.

Upon examining the removed door, it was clear that the lock was a simple bolt style, but it was also rusted over, making it seem unlikely that it operated smoothly. The windows were, of course, fixed in place, and the airtightness was preserved, leaving no room for a "needle and thread" style trick to penetrate—so, could Ms. Kyoko resolve this locked room situation before the arrival of the Coast Guard?

Ms. Kyoko has many sympathizers in the National Police Agency (though she has forgotten them), but it is uncertain whether this will be the case with the Coast Guard, and it cannot be taken for granted that they will allow her to cooperate in the investigation.

As part of her business activities, if she wants to solve the case, she would like to resolve it before their arrival, just as she declared.

A time-limited mystery.

With a mix of anticipation and anxiety... or rather, with a half-believing, half-doubting attitude, I watched Ms. Kyoko's movements (though I had knowledge of life-saving, when it came to investigation activities, like steering, all I could do was watch), and what she said as she finally raised herself up from her crawling pose—a pose not fit for her sympathizers to see—was not the elucidation of a cleverly crafted locked room trick.

Instead,

"Mr. Mamoru. I've figured out who the culprit is,"

she declared in a leap.

6

The investigation began with an announcement of resolution that, as a subordinate serving his master, one would want to praise as the fastest detective, but the solution presented was disappointingly mundane.

No locked room trick or anything of the sort.

"It seems like the vice-captain struck the captain from behind with a paperweight while he was steering, and then, the vice-captain himself forcefully bumped his own forehead with the paperweight he was holding in both hands—as if attempting suicide after the crime,"

Ms. Kyoko said quickly and without any pretense of dramatization. The resolution was straightforward, and while it might have been anticlimactic, there was no room for complaint. If one person is killed in a locked room with only two people, then the other person must be the culprit—a variation of that.

But the pattern of "the other person" attempting suicide isn't often heard of... Even if it was something like a double suicide attempt, can someone really kill themselves by hitting their head with a paperweight?

No, perhaps the vice-captain failed and ended up nearly dead—maybe he misjudged his act while trying to pretend to be a victim attacked by an assailant.

Or, if he was trying to frame a third party, he would have at least left the door to the steering room open as a slight trick.

Could it then be a determined suicide?

"Ms. Kyoko, why do you jump to the conclusion that the vice-captain intended to kill the captain and then commit suicide? Maybe the captain tried to kill the vice-captain and then commit suicide?"

When I asked about the possibility that Ms. Kyoko, with her exhaustive reasoning, would have naturally pursued, she explained:

"The captain was struck from behind, and the vice-captain was struck from the front. If the aim is to kill, it's more efficient to strike from behind, but there is no law that says you must not strike from the front—though there is a law that says you must not kill. Also, striking one's own back of the head is not necessarily impossible."

Then she paused.

Ms. Kyoko took her time to scrutinize the hypothesis I had formed, and then pointed to the paperweight on the floor, the murder weapon.

"The fingerprints on the murder weapon belonged only to the vice-captain."

It was a shiny paperweight that clearly retained fingerprints without the need for powdering—an item that might not have been particularly characteristic, but it seems that in the course of rescuing lives, Ms. Kyoko had also checked the fingerprints of the two "victims" without missing a beat.

She is a forgetful detective that resets each day, but when it comes to memory within a day, she is incomparable to an ordinary person.

"Is it possible that the perpetrator was wearing gloves?"

Despite the relentless insistence from my boss, I pursued the question, only to be told, "In this case, if the perpetrator had touched the paperweight with gloves on, the fingerprints would have been wiped off. As far as we can see, there is no trace of that."

Flawless logic.

I couldn't bring myself to suggest the possibility that the perpetrator had polished the paperweight until it shone after beating both individuals and then transferred the fingerprints of the first officer onto it. I, who lack investigative skills, understand that it's impossible to wipe off only the fingerprints from a bloodied paperweight.

"Well, I guess this is reality, isn't it? We can only imagine what kind of friction there was between the captain and the first officer."

But let me tell you, if I were to speak from my position—having been suddenly taken on a directionless trip by my boss, like an attendant, without explanation, expected to chase after her when she took off without complaint, ordered to break doors and then almost bearing the full responsibility for it, never receiving a single word of praise, and having my tentative hypotheses constantly picked apart—the first officer would have plenty of reasons to want to kill the captain.

"Essentially, subordinates are out to kill their bosses, aren't they?"

"You're saying something quite frightening, Mr. Mamoru."

In any case, it seemed like the case was easily resolved, but Ms. Kyoko did not seem to think so.

"The motive leading to the murder can indeed be argued in any number of ways," she said.

"But why it happened here and now, in the wheelhouse, remains a mystery."

"Eh?"

"If one harbored deep-seated resentment and wanted to kill the captain, they could've done it on land—there was no need to do it aboard a ship at sea."

"..."

Indeed...

Now that I think about it, that's a much more challenging problem than the mystery of the locked room.

It was fortunate that Ms. Kyoko happened to be on board, for if she hadn't been, who knows what disaster might have ensued.

If it had not been for her, all fifty passengers might have been caught in the crossfire without exception.

Even if the murder wasn't premeditated but committed in a fit of rage, then surely the murderer wouldn't commit suicide afterward... Given that there are only two crew members, the only person left to handle the ship would be the first officer in the wheelhouse.

It's hardly conceivable that, with fifty passengers aboard, one would forget them and commit a "resolved suicide"... Driven by guilt, or in a fit of desperation, even if one were to attempt suicide by hitting their head on the corner of the paperweight, wouldn't that be after docking?

Why "now"?

Why did it happen today, at this time, in the wheelhouse—surely the first officer had no "today or never" reason either.

"Well, we are travelling like this on the premise that a great detective attracts cases, so it's odd that it's 'good thing I happened to be on board'."

Look towards the lying captain and sub-captain-towards the victim and the murderer,

"Since we don't know when they will regain consciousness, it seems that I will have to figure out the reason why he couldn't choose the time."

'It's a tough case,' she said.

She said solemnly-even though no one asked her to.

7

Before moving on to the resolution, let's organize the issues or points of discussion as follows:

1. In the wheelhouse of a high-speed boat with a journey of less than thirty minutes, there were two people.

2. Among the approximately fifty people on board, these two were the only ones qualified to pilot the vessel.

3. One of the two (presumably while steering) was bludgeoned from behind by the other (attempted murder).

4. Subsequently, the perpetrator (attempted murderer) struck their own forehead with the same weapon (attempted suicide?).

5. At this point, the wheelhouse door remained locked, and the high-speed boat maintained its top speed.

6. If things continued this way, upon entering port, a collision with the quay was inevitable, and both the ship and all passengers would suffer a damage that couldn't be disregarded.

7. Why did the attempted murderer, despite it being an obvious situation, commit an unforgivable act of murder and the subsequent suicide, threading the needle to do so at the worst possible timing?

It almost feels like a thought experiment, but then again, reasoning is essentially a detective's thought experiment, isn't it?

If an amateur like me, who is no detective, were to make an amateur judgment, it would seem most reasonable to think that the first mate thought, "My life is already a mess having killed one person, so what does it matter how many more get dragged down with me?"

That’s desperation for you.

It's like what people say, "If you kill one, killing two or three is no different"—although, in reality, the law treats the murder of one, two, or three people very differently. But, well, I can understand the feeling that might lead someone to think that way.

However, similarly, it should be common sense, even without considering the law, that killing one person and killing fifty are entirely different matters—could it be, "Since I'm going to commit suicide anyway, what happens after doesn't matter to me"?

Or perhaps, "Since I'm going to kill myself anyway, why not go out with a bang?" Maybe it was like taking on a challenge to see how many people he could kill, as if it were some sort of accomplishment.

Because, if the first mate had any common sense, he would have technically been able to stop the ship's engines before committing suicide.

There wouldn't have been any issue if he had stopped the ship before killing himself—well, issues had already arisen, but he could have confined the problem to the smallest unit within a closed room.

However, in such cases, one need not assume that the perpetrator is always rational. In detective novels, logic is often prioritized, but to state the obvious, committing murder in a law-abiding country is in itself irrational and illogical.

While there are certainly cases where crimes are rational and logical, this doesn't appear to be one of those... it shouldn't be.

The first mate likely killed impulsively and committed suicide impulsively, perhaps too panicked to consider the lives of the fifty passengers or to even think about applying the brakes—that's my amateur conclusion.

But, of course, a detective's expert judgment differs.

"I see, I see. I certainly won't dismiss your opinion outright, Mr. Mamoru. I agree with you on some points. Namely, that the first mate, who "killed" the captain, did not intentionally involve us passengers in his plan."

Huh?

I was fully prepared for harsh, painful criticism, but if she agrees on that point, isn't it almost the same as agreeing entirely?

The first mate intended only to kill the captain alone—

"No, no. This detective thinks that perhaps the captain was the collateral damage—and that the first mate did not commit suicide out of guilt, nor out of recklessness, but because it was something that was inevitable."

"...?"

I'm becoming confused.

What is collateral damage, and what is inevitable?

"It's collateral damage with a very high degree of necessity, as far as the first mate is concerned. Of course, murder is neither a logical act nor a rational one, but even so, the person has their own set of beliefs that make sense to them."

"Could it be..."

Even with such hints, I still hadn't grasped the "logical reason" that Ms. Kyoko was alluding to.

However, if I were to skim just the surface of her argument, it would go something like this.

"If it was said that the collateral damage was not fifty passengers but the captain, then are you saying that what the first mate really wanted to kill was the passengers?"

"If he didn’t want to kill a random fifty people all at once, it would be some of them—extremely speaking, it might have been just one person. In that case, the collateral damage would be forty-nine passengers plus the captain. Although the result is fifty people—the meaning is different."

If the target was a passenger.

To sink a ship just to kill one person—what?

Regardless of how plausible it might be, there was no question that it somehow provided an explanation for the inexplicable actions of the first mate.

Essentially, the first mate did not bludgeon the captain to death due to his suppressed frustrations as a subordinate, but rather, he attempted to kill someone who could pilot a high-speed boat due to a technical issue.

That, regrettably, included the captain.

And it also included himself.

"As you say, Mr. Mamoru, it's rare to find someone who can decide to involve nearly fifty people just to kill a single one—so the first mate had to kill himself. At the last minute, he had to take drastic measures to ensure that he wouldn’t reverse his decision or be persuaded by someone else to stop."

It's like in a game of chicken, throwing away the steering wheel—it explains why the crime scene was pointlessly trivial, yet a perfectly complete locked room.

Rather, that locked room supports Ms. Kyoko’s deduction—her thought experiment.

Even if there was someone among the fifty passengers who had a boating license and could steer the ship, they would have locked the door from the inside to prevent anyone from entering.

He might have thought that a rusty iron door was only good for buying time, but if messing with the steering wheel had triggered an alarm throughout the ship, then that was the best measure he could have taken.

"The captain was killed, and he himself committed suicide, which could have resulted in the deaths of fifty passengers—not quite: he killed the captain, committed suicide himself, and actually desired the outcome of killing all fifty passengers. If you follow the cliché of hiding a leaf in the forest, it's like he burned down the entire forest just to burn a leaf. Just as passengers can't choose who else boards as a passenger, they can't choose who pilots the vehicle. But that explains why the crime happened 'today,' 'at this time,' 'in the pilot house.' If it were just the captain, he could have been targeted on land as well, but the chance of the person he wanted to kill boarding his ship as a passenger isn't something that comes by often. For the first mate, the less than thirty minutes of operation time for this high-speed boat might have been an unexpected miraculous time. People say it's 'like being possessed by the devil'—oh, look, Mr. Mamoru, it seems the rescue boats have arrived? Shall we proceed to this deserted island, Shokeijima?"

8

Upon landing on the deserted island, as expected, the Forgetful Detective becomes involved in a difficult case with things like twin old ladies, masked men, hidden treasures, nursery rhymes, caves, and so on leaping about, but during that time, I continued to think distractedly about the incident on the "Speed Wave".

Whether Ms. Kyoko's deduction is correct cannot be said until the first mate regains consciousness, and frankly, it's like a game of make-believe without any evidence—not that I should be making such a sore loser’s excuse, but I feel that my irrational deduction is more realistic.

However, if Ms. Kyoko's seemingly off-target deduction happens to hit the bullseye, we must not overlook the lingering question: among the fifty passengers, who was the culprit actually aiming for?

It's not about guessing the perpetrator, but the victim.

As it was clear even before we landed, Shokeijima is not a place tourists visit; most of the passengers on the ship were islanders or their associates. So, isn't it a bit of an overstatement to say that for the first mate, the only chance to kill his target was "today"?

For example, even if the captain's murder was unavoidable, one would think he could wait for a day when fewer passengers would be involved, or at least have that much rationality—if there's a loophole in this moral pointing, it only applies if the first mate's intended victim was not among the "majority of passengers."

For instance.

Like a detective who "happens" to board the ship that day.

I thought perhaps the catastrophe was avoided because Ms. Kyoko happened to be on board, but if the catastrophe itself was aimed at Ms. Kyoko, then the story changes entirely.

And there is a very real possibility of that.

Because Ms. Kyoko is the Forgetful Detective, her past is completely shrouded in darkness—in other words, it's impossible to know where, from whom, or what kind of grudge she might have incurred. It's as unknowable as to whether she had ever gone on a space journey.

She could be the target of a grudge from a criminal she's dealt with as a detective, or simply be hated—even if she has forgotten, the other party has not.

If such a person learns that she has boarded a ship under his command, the first mate would surely not let this miraculous opportunity slip by.

If that's the case, it's somewhat ironic.

This hypothesis embodies the very cliché that Ms. Kyoko centered on for this trip: "A master detective attracts cases wherever they go."

Ms. Kyoko not only solves cases but also prevents them from happening; yet, had she not boarded the ship in the first place, this incident might never have occurred—of course, this is just a thought experiment, and if I were to submit such a flimsy hypothesis, I'd surely be fired without mercy, even while on the trip.

If that's the case, then there's also the possibility that Mr. Mamoru here, who is equally a stranger, could have been targeted—without a comeback to that argument, I'd be left speechless.

Yes, that's right.

It's not just Ms. Kyoko; nobody knows where, from whom, or what kind of grudge they might have incurred.

It's possible that by performing ethical deeds, a wicked criminal has missed out on benefits, or by living a life of integrity, one is despised by those who couldn't live the same way, or by making a loved one happy, one has disregarded the dignity of someone who isn't happy.

We all just seem to forget that.

[redacted]

第四枚

水上飛行機『ウォータージェット』

[redacted]

Ch 4: Hydroplane “Water Jet”

0

I am Kyoko Okitegami. White hair. Glasses.

The Forgetful Detective whose memory resets every day.

Currently, on a business trip.

1

Ms. Kyoko only has today.

Therefore, spending those precious twenty-four hours in a bad mood is out of the question, a waste of both time and memory at its most reluctant, but on that day, having surpassed two weeks of a journey without a destination that also served as a sales activity for the Okitegami Detective Agency, the forgetful detective was extremely grumpy.

She puffed out her chubby cheeks and sharpened her lips—considering the age written on her left arm, it was somewhat cute anger, but for me, the bodyguard who obediently follows her on her journey, there's nothing more stressful than the atmosphere on the road deteriorating.

Well, whatever the case, during a trip, there are always times when the team's mood sours, so at first, I was prepared for such a moment, but on the contrary, Ms. Kyoko, whose memory resets every day, seemed completely unaffected by the travel stress, so I might have let my guard down as the days went by.

However, misfortune comes from unexpected directions.

It might be fate, but Ms. Kyoko's bad mood had started from an unusually good mood—we were having breakfast included in the hotel plan when a waiter brought over coffee and mentioned that there was a seaplane that crossed the nearby lake, a local attraction.

Originally, we had planned to take the train and even had the reservations for it, but:

"Cancel those reservations immediately! How can I not ride a seaplane after hearing there's one here?! Do you know how many times I've watched 'Porco Rosso,' Mr. Mamoru?!"

I was taken aback by her unexpected scolding for my quick response as a bodyguard.

What a demotivating work environment—how should I know how many times the forgetful detective has watched "Porco Rosso"?

Of course, such a tyrannical boss wouldn't escape divine punishment. When we arrived at the lakeside boarding area, a handwritten sign saying "Closed for Today" was placed in the reception space.

The level of Ms. Kyoko's disappointment upon seeing that information was unprecedented—even in front of a gruesome crime scene, the forgetful detective who would say, "I'll forget it tomorrow anyway," crumbled to her knees.

"It's because you were dawdling, Mr. Mamoru..."

She blamed me.

No, it seems it hasn't been operating since the first service, so it's definitely not my fault—but of course, I am aware of the masterpiece that is "Porco Rosso," though it's hard to sympathize with such an unabashed passion.

"Pig, pig, pig, pig, pig..."

It was a fine line between expressing her love for the movie and berating a useless subordinate, but we couldn't stay lamenting by the deserted lakeside forever—when I suggested we give up and head to the train station instead:

"That's why you're a pig,"

Ms. Kyoko said as she shook her head and stood up—she had recovered. The repetition of 'pig' apparently was her way of scolding me. I thought it was merely her dislike of my noncommittal, vague responses, but it was more than that.

She declared:

"It seems this suspension is due to an 'incident'—in that case, there's no choice but to solve it. Have you forgotten who I am?"

You are a tyrannical boss.

Or perhaps, a master detective.

The handwritten sign read "Closed for Today," not "Closed Today," which the master detective seemed to find odd—she sensed the air of an emergency closure from the phrasing and speculated that there might be circumstances, perhaps an "incident," and so she lodged a complaint with the operating company.

What is frightening is the obsessive yearning in the name of love.

I wonder if people are so eager to fly seaplanes-even if the temporary closure was due to unavoidable circumstances, there would not necessarily be room for a professional detective to engage in it, but I admire her energy.

Despite the risk of finding false hope and facing disappointment once more, the fact remains that Ms. Kyoko, thirty minutes after kneeling by the lakeside, was elegantly sipping coffee on the sofa in the reception room of the operating company.

As a bodyguard, I should have been standing by behind her as part of my duty—but rather than being there for business activities as a private detective, this time it seemed Ms. Kyoko just wanted to ride on a seaplane, that very day no less, and had decided to employ some unconventional tactics.

"Yes, actually, we are in the middle of our honeymoon, and we really wanted to ride on your seaplane. Is there absolutely no way to make it happen?"

She told quite the convincing lie.

I couldn't believe there were newlyweds with such a clear master-servant dynamic, but as a faithful subordinate, I couldn't correct the tyranny of an overbearing boss. So, I ended up sitting right next to Ms. Kyoko, pretending to be the groom—a rather unusual position for me. Especially when Ms. Kyoko took my hand, leaned against my shoulder, and relied on me to support her weight.

Does she really want to ride on a seaplane that badly?

I haven't seen it in person yet, so it's hard to empathize—I've experienced many forms of transportation during our travels, but Ms. Kyoko's enthusiasm for this matter is on a different level.

The one who dealt directly with such a troublesome complainer was the vice president of the operating company. Judging from the location and size of the headquarters, I had assumed it was a company with a substantial history, so it was quite a surprise that such a high-ranking officer would handle an unexpected visit without an appointment—apparently, there was a reason for that.

Or rather, that seemed to be the reason itself—the company was not in its normal state at the moment.

"Actually, our president was in a plane accident—no, I wonder if it can be called an accident..."

The seemingly kind vice president informed us about this unreasonable complaint forced upon him by a newlywed couple.

"...Do you mean the seaplane crashed?" asked Ms. Kyoko.

"Yes, indeed, on that day, our president was at the helm of our seaplane 'Water Jet,' which did crash," he said, seemingly with difficulty.

"The cause of death was poisoning."

Poisoning?

3

With the company in disarray following the death of its assertive, one-man president, the seaplane operating company was now in a state of total chaos, hence the vice president himself had to handle the impromptu sales pitch (complaint).

Certainly, I can't praise the lie, but it seemed that Ms. Kyoko's pretense of being a newlywed couple had indeed garnered sympathy.

With an apologetic expression, the vice president said, "This is the situation, so we can't operate any planes other than the crashed one. At the earliest, we won't be able to resume operations until tomorrow or later," and he kept bowing deeply—he was both sorry and willing to bow his head, but that did not seem to be the answer that the bride wanted.

Still, it stood to reason.

Scheduling for "tomorrow or later" is far from the fastest for Ms. Kyoko.

The fastest detective, also known as the Forgetful Detective.

A detective who solves any case within a day—because she must, due to the time limit imposed on her. If she wanted to ride a seaplane, it had to be done today, as part of her to-do list.

"So, to put it another way, if the mysterious circumstances surrounding the president's death are clarified, we could resume operations immediately, right, dear?"

What's with this "right, dear?"

Well, speaking from a detective's point of view, it was indeed as she said—however, 'mysterious circumstances' might be a bit of an overstatement. If you ask me whether the president's death was accompanied by a so-called mystery novel-like enigma, it seems not so much, from what we've heard from the vice president.

Not a death by crash—but by poisoning.

Cyanide, a staple of mystery novels, was ingested in pill form, leading to immediate death—and judging from the circumstances, it seems the president had taken the poison himself.

After all, it happened in the cockpit of an airplane.

It was a solo flight, not carrying any passengers to begin with, and of course, all doors were firmly shut—there was no space for either water or air to enter.

"A perfect locked room—and moreover, a locked room in the sky?"

Hearing this, Ms. Kyoko's performance as a newlywed wavered a bit, revealing her detective-like nature, but if the poison was self-administered, then there isn't much mystery to a locked room, be it in the sky or underwater.

Then, it's only natural for the plane to crash afterwards—if there is a mystery to this case, it would be why the president suddenly took it upon himself to swallow cyanide while piloting the plane.

In the pocket of the pilot suit the president was wearing, there was a handwritten will, which would normally suggest suicide—but if it was suicide, there would be no need to carry it out in the pilot's seat of a plane mid-flight.

A handwritten will seems too convenient—if it had been typed on a word processor, it might have been more credible. There was no sign of expressing suicidal thoughts on social media or the like. Well, there might be other circumstances regarding that. And those other circumstances might be complicating matters.

The president, being a one-man show, seemed to have made quite a few enemies, both internally and externally.

Ms. Kyoko and I, having pushed our way in as a newlywed couple, offered our condolences, but the vice president, with a sigh, said,

"I was afraid this would happen one day."

It seems that he was a rather unmanageable top executive, and I glanced towards Ms. Kyoko.

"What is it? Why are you looking at me, dear? If someone sees us like this, they'll think I'm a tyrannical boss."

She seemed to be trying to say she's not.

A murder disguised as a suicide.

It could be considered a classic in locked room murder cases.

A criminal, filled with deep resentment, may have found some way to make the president ingest the poison while piloting the plane and killed him—this possibility can't be denied, which is why the operating company is currently dysfunctional due to the police's request.

They can't decide on a successor until the truth behind the president's death becomes a bit clearer—after all, there's the fear of inadvertently appointing the "criminal" as the next president.

To put it extremely, even the vice president currently dealing with us as a newlywed couple could potentially be the one who committed the crime aiming for the presidency.

Remembering my duty as a bodyguard, I was about to clench my fist on impulse, but since our hands were tied, I ended up just squeezing Ms. Kyoko's hand tightly.

"Oh no, not here, dear."

Don't you 'oh no, not here, dear' me.

What kind of newlywed is that.

"You've explained that there is sufficient reason for him to have gotten killed, but on the other hand, is there a reason enough for him to have committed suicide? What was written in this 'handwritten will'?"

To such an intense question from a newlywed, the vice president replied,

"Well, it was only written that he intended to take his life—I haven't seen the actual document, but it seems it only contained something like a farewell poem."

A farewell poem, huh.

But, this information might not be true.

Even if it's extreme to consider the vice president as the culprit, if it was written that "the company's management was at a dead end," I doubt he would disclose such internal information—there's internal information, and personal information to consider.

This time, Ms. Kyoko has not revealed her identity as a detective, so gathering information isn't going as smoothly as usual. There is also a conflicting desire that hinders her—instead of wanting to solve the case, she seems more intent on just wanting to ride in a seaplane.

"Cyanide, as you know, is a poison that works instantly. Therefore, if he drank the poison on the ground it couldn't have taken effect in mid-flight, which means the president was poisoned while piloting... Perhaps he was a romantic who wanted to die while flying?"

"Rather, he wasn't fond of flying in airplanes. He had a constitution that made him prone to getting sick... so when I first heard the news of the crash, I thought it was due to a piloting error."

It was, after all, an unauthorized flight.

I wanted to question why someone who gets sick easily would run a seaplane company, but then again, not everyone can choose their dream job... I, too, understand that, being someone who works in a harsh environment.

Not many people can find their true calling like Ms. Kyoko—though she's currently not a detective but a newlywed.

" 'He drank cyanide mistaking it for anti-sickness medicine—or was tricked into drinking cyanide disguised as such'. Is the police suspecting something along those lines?"

"It's possible. If you think about it, it gives a certain explanation to the reason for the 'suicide' in the airplane."

While saying this, the vice president seemed somewhat skeptical of this hypothesis—and well, I am doubtful too.

Even if we can explain the reason for taking the poison on the plane, it still doesn't explain why the president decided to board the plane in the first place.

Without understanding the process that led to such an unfavorable situation where anti-sickness medicine was necessary, it's hard to be fully convinced.

"Hmm. In that case, it seems we need to get some hands-on work in the actual locked room."

"Hands-on work?"

Receiving a dubious look from the vice president, Ms. Kyoko put on a composed expression. "No, I meant to say, I hope my husband doesn't get too handsy," she quipped, misdirecting him.

I give up. Do whatever you want.

4

"If I can't ride in the seaplane I've been longing for, then at least show me the aircraft. If not, I'll have no choice but to divorce."

Ms. Kyoko's plea, which could be taken as a threat or a mere bluff, was initially met with reluctance by the vice president. But whether he was eventually persuaded, or he simply wanted us to leave as soon as possible amidst his busy schedule, he guided us to the dock by the lakeside.

The situation of potentially having to divorce over not seeing a seaplane was puzzling, to say the least.

Of course, the actual seaplane that crashed had been taken away by the police as evidence? But there were several other aircraft of the same type—so we, the detective and her bodyguard, or rather the bride and groom, entered what seemed like a small gymnasium by the lake.

During our journey, Ms. Kyoko had been snuggling up to me and playfully linking arms with me—she's the type of detective who really gets into her role. If her fake smile included a grimace to the point of comparing me to a pig, I can't say it was very role-appropriate.

Yet, it felt like an impromptu date at a seaplane museum—I didn't want to pour oil on the flames of Ms. Kyoko's bad mood, so I mostly kept my mouth shut. Realistically though, even if she could come up with a suitable answer to the president's mysterious death, I doubted we could actually ride a seaplane today (my realistic way of thinking might be why I was likened to a pig). Nevertheless, the opportunity to see so many different types of aircraft up close more than made up for any disappointment.

Up to now, I hadn't been as passionately involved as Ms. Kyoko, but when you see it up close, a seaplane really is a cool vehicle.

I wonder who thought to make something like this.

Even though I've been an adult for quite some time, the child inside of me is stirring—Ms. Kyoko, on the other hand, was feigning calm on purpose.

She's hard to understand.

"This here is the same type of seaplane the president was on,"

The vice president pointed out a smaller type of seaplane floating in the dock—divided by a partition, the cockpit and the passenger space weren't very large.

Could it hold five or six people?

Looking down, there were two floats.

To think that someone could hide inside these... well, it's not impossible, but using it as a trick would be so far-fetched it couldn't escape accusations of being unfair.

It's hard to believe it could withstand a flight, let alone a crash... but then again, even if you sat in the normal seats, there doesn't seem to be a place to hide.

The entrance is large and made of glass, you'd have to crouch down quite a bit... or rather, lie down on the floor to not be seen from outside with just a glance.

Whatever the president's state of mind when boarding, he would have at least done a pre-flight check of the aircraft... and even if he missed something (how about folding yourself into the life jacket compartment? Could a child do it?), once the flight started, it would be impossible to harm the president physically separated in the cockpit. In small aircraft, cockpit security isn't that strict, or rather, there's often not even a door between it and the passenger seats, but this seaplane could practically be considered independent.

And by "practically," I mean—

"Well, the cockpit and the passenger seats are quaintly connected by a speaking tube! How charming! Hey pig, no, say dear, it's charming, isn't it!"

Ms. Kyoko, who had been pretending to be calm, couldn't hide her excitement about the structure and elbowed me—it resonated because of the speaking tube, I suppose.

Putting aside how she still sneaked a "pig" in there, what about a trick involving passing a cyanide pill through the speaking tube? If one could devise a mechanism where the pill shoots into it the moment someone opens their mouth to speak... just an amateurish thought I had, but even so, that trick would require the criminal to be on the passenger side.

Plus, it doesn't solve the rather plain yet biggest mystery of why the president, who dislikes planes, boarded one in the first place. If someone could force him onto a plane, it seems they could also force him to take medicine... or would that be taking it too far?

"May I just briefly sit in the pilot's seat?"

Ms. Kyoko finally let go of my arm, which she had been clinging to like a koala, and without waiting for explicit permission from the vice president, stepped onto the boarding ladder.

Ms. Kyoko was wearing a very short skirt, but she didn't seem to care as she nimbly climbed up and opened the unlocked door to enter, perhaps for an inspection. Though it might be an active move as a seaplane enthusiast, this "try anything that can be tried" spirit seemed to be part of her thorough detective reasoning.

While pretending to be a newlywed, she hadn't forgotten her detective duties, it seemed.

"The cockpit is definitely for a single person. It seems impossible for even a child to ride along—but shall we test it, Mr. Mamoru?"

"Huh?"

"Let's challenge whether two can fit or not. If it turns out the criminal was co-piloting, the situation changes completely."

Without making any objections to such an unreasonable request, I reluctantly ascended the stairs, while the vice president watched me with a sympathetic gaze—as if feeling pity for a husband who, despite being newly married, seemed to be already henpecked.

In truth, I was an employee being worked to the bone, but if this is how such illegal investigations get through, I guess it's all fine?

When I reached the top of the stairs, as expected, there didn't seem to be any space for me to sneak into the cockpit—well, if Ms. Kyoko judged it impossible for a child, there was no way for me, nearly two meters tall, to find a space to slip into.

"No, if you don't try to hide, and if you ignore comfort, it may not be impossible. Specifically, if you could become a seat."

"A seat?"

Even without asking back, I knew what my boss was demanding, but I pretended to be dumb and tried to feign ignorance—a futile resistance.

As if passing by, Ms. Kyoko went down the stairs and I took her place in the cockpit—it was, of course, my first time ever sitting in the cockpit of an airplane. Naturally, it was also my first experience being sat upon—actually, I've never been sat on while sitting in any chair.

The "Human Chair" in Edogawa Ranpo's story—could it possibly be about something like this?

"*Giggle*. When I first met you, Mr. Mamoru, I never imagined that I would be sitting on your lap like this."

You don't remember the first time we met.

In the mind of the forgetful detective, our first encounter was at this morning's breakfast buffet, but alas, to be trusted so much in just a few hours.

However, the conclusion seemed to be that if being literally sat upon was the condition, then a two-person ride in the cockpit was not entirely impossible—however, as Ms. Kyoko also mentioned, in this case, the condition of "without the president noticing" had to be completely abandoned.

Moreover, taking into account the vice president's belated information that "the president is a rather corpulent person, so it would be difficult to board in that posture," this "trial" seemed likely to end with me simply becoming Ms. Kyoko's reclining seat.

Ms. Kyoko is so petite that her weight hardly matters, so this posture isn't too hard on me physically, but psychologically, that's another story. If it were a larger man, it doesn't seem like a bearable position.

Rather, such a position might even inspire murderous intent, but surely that wouldn't be the motive. On the contrary, the likelihood of the president being the one sat upon is low, considering his autocratic nature as we've heard about—unless the perpetrator is his grandchild.

"Even if it's an exaggeration to say a grandchild, if one were in a relationship close enough to sit on one's lap, there would be simpler ways to kill, wouldn't there?" Ms. Kyoko said while sitting on my lap.

That statement is equivalent to Ms. Kyoko saying that she could kill me at any time, but does she realize it?

"Um, is it alright if we wrap this up soon? I need to get back to my duties..." the vice president timidly interjected.

Hmm, time's up, it seems.

Well, as the fastest detective, this irregular activity had to end somewhere. Relieved and content that Ms. Kyoko had gotten her wish to not only see the plane up close but also to sit in the cockpit of the seaplane she admired, I was ready to call it a day. However, she, after thanking him and saying, "Yes, thank you very much. It seems we won't have to face a divorce crisis after all" (as if a newlywed couple sitting on each other's laps in a confined space would face a crisis

of divorce), then exclaimed with exaggerated gestures and a voice loud enough to echo throughout the dock,

"But it's a shame!"

"If only you would let me pilot this seaplane, I could immediately get to the bottom of the truth behind the president's death! It's just so frustrating that I can't help the vice president, who has been so good to my husband and me! If only I could get the permission to fly, no, if you would just turn a blind eye for a mere five minutes, it's crystal clear that I could solve all the troubles your company is facing without missing a thing, but to just watch your company go bankrupt without being able to do anything! All it would take is for the vice-president to blink a little longer and everyone would be happy, but alas, I won't be able to offer any such godsent advice!"

5

"Ah? Oh no, I didn't mean it like that at all... I'm sorry, it really came out like I was begging."

It was nothing as cute as begging, but an hour later, we were dancing in the sky—making graceful turns over the lake.

Under the pretext of a test flight.

Considering it wouldn't be proper to have two people in the cockpit, one on the other's lap, I moved to the passenger seat—the vice president, who was supposed to be with us originally, made the extremely wise decision to back out at the last minute due to fear.

In all honesty, the truly wise decision would have been "not to let a newlywed couple who showed up out of the blue do as they please with the company's seaplane," but perhaps the operating company was in a more desperate situation than I thought. With the president gone and no choice but to suspend operations—especially with the suspicion that someone from within the company or the family might be the culprit.

It could be said that the detective, driven by personal greed, had skillfully exploited the situation of those clutching at straws.

"By the way, just to make sure, Ms. Kyoko, you really do have a seaplane pilot's license, sworn to God, right?"

"That's not good, doubting your employer, Mr. Mamoru. The vice president believed me without even seeing my license, didn't he?"

That's precisely the problem because he believed her without seeing any license—it could lead to charges of fraud.

Since she's a detective with a completely unknown past, it wouldn't be surprising if she did have a pilot's license. Her speech was convincing, and that's probably why the vice president believed it... This conversation, by the way, was through a voice tube. It's an old-fashioned system, but it's surprisingly clear for conversation.

"Instead, please look outside the window. Can you remain unenchanted by this spectacular view?"

I can. I'm utterly fascinated by the detective in the cockpit and my own future—Ms. Kyoko might only have today, but I have a life after tomorrow.

I can only admire Ms. Kyoko's guts to take any means necessary for her goals, even grasping the control stick of a seaplane for a flight... As a bodyguard, my duty might not be to protect Ms. Kyoko herself, but rather the good people who will be affected by her actions.

"Um, Ms. Kyoko. Now that we're actually flying, have you figured out the truth? Were you able to trace the feelings of the president during the flight?"

"Heh. You can't take this forgetful detective lightly, Mr. Mamoru."

Through the tube came her triumphant voice... which was light actually, but let's not dwell on that. The fact that I might be entrusting my life to an unlicensed fraudster's flying should be taken very seriously.

As I was regretting not making the same wise decision as the vice president to wait on the ground for the return, the voice tube conveyed her definitive line:

"I knew the truth of this case before we even took off."

Eh?

6

"Whether it's a seaplane or not, there's no need to talk about, let alone verify, the confidentiality of a plane's cabin. The concept of an 'airborne locked room' is romantic to mystery fans, but its robustness, comparable to that of a vault, has made many a master detective weep.

"In other words, if we are to judge the president's death as murder, it's hard to imagine anything other than a remote killing—devising a trick to use some sort of gimmick to kill the president aboard the plane from the ground.

"However, when it comes to poisoning, that too is difficult. A slow-acting poison might be one thing, but with something like cyanide, a delayed attack is impossible.

"The only conceivable scenario would be a system like a poison gas ejector, which activates when the control stick is moved, but since the cyanide was in tablet form, any such systematic mechanical trickery would inevitably leave physical traces.

"If the plane had crashed to the ground, it's possible that there would have been no trace left, but in this case, it's a seaplane traveling from one end of the lake to the other.

"When it crashes into the surface of the water, there should be some traces left.

"First and foremost, there's no explanation yet as to why the president, who disliked flying, would venture on a solo flight—so it seems unlikely that there was a setup in the plane itself.

"This won't do, that won't do, neither this nor that will do.

"This turns into a crime that seems impossibly perfect, but then again, what if we think about it the other way around?

"What if it wasn't a crime that was committed, but a suicide based on free will—after all, thinking about it normally, that's what it is.

"Thinking about it normally. Mr. Mamoru, you said the same, didn't you?

"In a locked room, with a suicide note, and poisoned.

"What other deductions can be made?

"Of course, that's why things are so muddled—because there's a sense of incongruence when one thinks that there was a need to commit suicide in an airplane during flight.

"He must have been aware that if he died and the plane crashed, it wouldn't be a minor loss to the company—and he wasn't ideologically inclined to want to die inside an airplane.

"In that case, what's the motive for suicide?

"The strong-willed, one-man president was resented by many, but at least in his lengthy suicide note, there didn't seem to be any fleeting circumstances of the world that he lamented.

"However, if we probe a step further into the motive for suicide, we can understand something—why the president chose the cockpit during a flight for his death becomes clear.

"I said it at the beginning.

"Such an 'airborne locked room' is robust enough to make master detectives cry, and it's a place where there's no room for a trick to enter—that's precisely why the president may have chosen it as his place of death.

"Not because he liked airplanes or for some emotional reason, but because it was a mystery-like, trick-proof locked room, that's why it was selected.

"Don't you understand? Then let's think about it the other way around—if the president had died somewhere other than during a flight, how would the situation have been interpreted?

"The handwritten suicide note, the cyanide he took himself, would still have looked like nothing more than suspicious tools—after all, the president was so widely resented that it wouldn't have been strange if he had been killed at any time, by anyone.

"No matter how he died—whether it was accidental or natural—some suspicion would remain.

"'Wasn't he really murdered?'

"'Made to look like an accident—'

"'Made to look like suicide—'

"The suspects were too numerous; once he was dead, it would inevitably look like a murder case—as if straight out of a mystery novel, someone would definitely be suspected.

"Certainly.

"For that very reason.

"For that very reason, if he was going to commit suicide, had to die in a situation where it was absolutely impossible for someone to kill him.

"Even the greatest detective couldn't unravel it—a perfectly enclosed locked room was the only place he could rest in peace with suicide.

"In order to loudly proclaim that he died by his own hand and not murdered, he had no choice but to commit suicide in a situation where it was virtually impossible for anyone else to have killed him.

"The 'airborne locked room' had more persuasive power than the suicide note or the manner of death.

"Indeed, as expected, the president's death is currently suspected to be a homicide, but the more you think about it, the more it seems that it could only be suicide.

"You say it's a leap in logic, but logic that doesn't leap is merely a waste.

"The president did not hesitate to crash the airplane without regard for the trouble it would cause the company, so why would he be so concerned about the direction of the investigation after his death? That's curious, isn't it?

"But that is precisely the motive for the suicide.

"Listening to the vice-president's story, it seemed true that the president had no motive for suicide—but, on reflection, it must be quite stressful to be at the center of a situation where everyone around you resents you and it wouldn't be strange if you were killed at any time, by anyone.

"The stress of being a hated individual.

"I can only imagine it, as someone who always strives to be a respected employer, but being in an environment where you could be killed by someone at any time and that continues 24 hours a day, seems to me to be a sufficient motive for taking one's own life.

"'I won't be killed.'

"'Rather than being killed against my will, I'll die with dignity by my own hand'—whether he thought that far is unclear.

"In that sense, the content of the suicide note, which was solely concerned with affirming his suicide, could be said to be utterly sincere. If he had written too many details, it could lead to the misunderstanding that 'he was driven to death by those around him'—not that it can be definitively called a misunderstanding, but at least the person himself would not have preferred to be thought of in that way.

"In a sense, the manner of his death could be said to have shielded those left behind from suspicion, but given the current chaos in the company, which has been driven to the point of letting amateurs take the controls, it seems there was hardly any such noble sentiment.

"Dying in an environment that seems like nothing but suicide.

"That was the reason this locked room was created—indeed, in that sense, it could be called a classic locked room from a detective novel."

The truth of the matter certainly made sense, even through the speaking tube, but more than that, an unforgettable word was mixed into the resolution just now—"amateurs"?

Amateurs taking the controls?

I knew that you were an amateur!

As I impulsively almost snapped back a complaint into the speaking tube, the fastest detective restrained me with "Excuse me, now that we've cleared the air, may I have a moment," and then, in a manner befitting a forgetful detective and somewhat awkwardly, she continued.

"I seem to have carelessly forgotten how to land a seaplane—could my fabulous bodyguard, please protect this white pig?"

I will protect you.

[redacted]

第五枚

観光バス『ハイスピードロード』

[redacted]

Ch 5: Tourist Bus “High Speed Road”

0

I am Kyoko Okitegami.

Twenty-five years old, a detective.

My memory resets every day.

Currently on a business trip.

I think it's about time to head back.

1

It's probably been thoroughly discussed already—the mystery novel cliché, or "pattern," where the famous detective encounters incidents wherever they go. I don't think there's anything a person like me can add to that conversation—however, actually accompanying a traveling detective as a bodyguard allows one to see things from a different perspective.

The real question that arises is, isn't it rare for someone to live without encountering any incidents? Even if one intends to live an utterly ordinary daily life, isn't it likely that they will face some sort of incident, big or small, on a daily basis?

If you live for ten, twenty years, it's natural to come across death at some point—whether you're a famous detective or not, encountering incidents wherever you go is a promise of life, a "pattern" of its own.

Without exaggeration, is there anyone who lives their days without encountering incidents? If there is, that in itself would be an incident.

That mystery should be solved.

Looking at it from another angle—just as the valid opinion that "you can't just run into celebrities easily" doesn't apply to those in the entertainment industry, and the sensible notion that one will never see a sum like a billion yen doesn't apply to bank employees or staff at the national mint, it's perfectly natural for a detective whose specialty is solving the mysteries of incidents to encounter them daily—if not, they would be out of a job.

Unfortunately, my employer, the forgetful detective Kyoko, is not the type to say, "Isn't it fine, Mr. Mamoru? If I'm bored, it means the world is at peace," as she cheerfully enjoys her tea—encountering incidents daily is as routine for her as her memory resetting every day.

It's not a lifework; it's routine work.

That said, our journey is finally starting to see a conclusion.

Or rather, my boss Ms. Kyoko Okitegami, a cash-on-hand person, was running out of travel funds—essentially, this journey is a business trip for the Okitegami Detective Agency, or rather, a service activity, so the money only decreases and never increases.

Since she's masquerading as a famous detective who "gets involved somehow" for the sake of investment, even if she solves a difficult case, not a penny of the fee comes her way.

Well, there is a special circumstance that the fashionable Ms. Kyoko buys more clothes than she encounters incidents everywhere she goes... Travel experts say to keep luggage to a minimum, but she boldly ignores such rules, dragging me along as a bodyguard and baggage handler.

As an employee who gets all travel expenses, including food, covered, I can't complain about her lavish spending... At first, I thought the journey she suddenly proposed was just another of her eccentric ideas, but the results were more than sufficient.

The name of the forgetful detective has surely resonated far and wide, in both good and bad ways... From the beginning, the timing of our return was left up to me (since for Ms. Kyoko, who resets her memory every day, no matter how many cases she solves during the trip, each one becomes "her first case").

We can't leave the office unmanned forever; there are plenty of clients counting on Ms. Kyoko—what would happen to the young man prone to false accusations if Ms. Kyoko went incommunicado?

So, Ms. Kyoko and I are currently on what is called an overnight bus. The bus's name is "High-Speed Road," which sounds impressive, but it's a leisurely sightseeing bus that crosses the Japanese archipelago at a gentle pace over the course of three days.

Considering speed alone, it would have been faster to return by plane or train, but just because she's the fastest detective doesn't mean we have to seek the fastest way home—rather, it was a certain serendipity that the relevant tour bus would take a route that almost retraced the path we had come.

It's important to appreciate these things.

Of course, Ms. Kyoko didn't remember the itinerary from the day before (in fact, as far as she was aware, it was as if she had woken up in an unfamiliar travel destination and was suddenly told by an unknown man, "Let's go home"), but it wouldn't be so bad to slowly return home on such a reminiscent route, recalling the journey we'd had.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I was on our way home—I might as well have admitted I was off guard. I had completely thought that the business activities of the Okitegami Detective Agency were finished—if there were any words to dedicate to such "me of yesterday", it would have to be this line.

The excursion isn't over until you get home.

(Still, I should have been satisfied just to get home.)

2

"Is there a detective among our passengers?"

Such a call, which I had heard numerous times during this trip, echoed inside the tour bus "High-Speed Road" on the first night of the three-day trip, just as we were about to enter a service area on the highway for a driver change.

I must confess, I was sound asleep at that time—if you consider it was three o'clock in the middle of the night, it could be somewhat excusable, but still, as a detective's bodyguard, I cannot escape the criticism of being lazy and defenseless.

There's also the excuse that the environment was too comfortable.

"High-Speed Road" is a tour bus, so it might be different from a night bus in a strict sense, but I had an image that a night bus was "hard to sleep on." Rather than an image, I even thought that was part of its appeal. For a detective who is forbidden to sleep, it could be said that this was a favorable environment—so it wasn't the reason I chose a bus trip for the return journey, but it seemed like the bus was trying to dispel such an image.

The sleeping environment on the "High-Speed Road" tour bus was quite luxurious. While not fully flat, the seats reclined nearly flat, and pillows and blankets were provided—being a double-decker bus, with men on the first floor and women on the second, was probably also a well-considered arrangement (the toilets were naturally separate).

There were meals, albeit simple ones, and the luxury of drink bar-type facilities set up on the landing of the staircase—Ms. Kyoko, who had no trouble with sleeping in a mixed sleeping area on a ship, would be able to sleep anywhere if she wished... but it might be difficult to retain memories in this condition.

If each seat had been a private room, there would have been nothing more to say—there are buses like that in the world, which is quite astonishing.

I should say that I've spent most of my remaining travel money... If I may be so extravagant, the luxury bus was a bit of a letdown for those of us who were expecting nostalgia for our school days. And yet, such a feeling (nostalgia?) is unbecoming of an assistant to a forgetful detective, so I guess the punishment was just fitting.

Maybe I shouldn't speak of punishment.

Because next to me, a person was killed—inside the moving closed room of the bus, it was a murder case.

3

"So, you're saying you're the culprit? Mr. 'Mamoru Oyagiri', or so you claim."

"No, Ms. Kyoko... I am the bodyguard you employed... and drop the 'or so you claim'."

After all the passengers and crew (driver and bus guide) were evacuated to the service area, I was interrogated by the famous detective on the second floor of the tour bus that had become a crime scene.

"Why the second floor instead of the first?" one might ask. It goes without saying that the first floor was the scene of the incident, which had to be preserved until the arrival of the police—although, notably, there was no body on the problematic seat.

It had been carried outside.

This was because Ms. Kyoko—who had just been woken up—responded to the call of "Is there a detective among our passengers?" and successfully resuscitated the victim.

Therefore, what actually happened was an attempted murder, not a completed one.

The victim's spontaneous breathing was restored, though consciousness was not. This could be said to be characteristic of Ms. Kyoko's qualities as a renowned detective.

So, to explain the current situation in more detail, we are now waiting not only for the arrival of the police but also for an ambulance—considering the highways aren't congested, it shouldn't take more than twenty minutes, but Ms. Kyoko is not one to waste even twenty minutes idly.

Having resuscitated a victim who had suffered cardiac arrest, she took advantage of her achievement to smoothly transition into beginning an investigation—and now, she's interrogating me, the "prime suspect," as I was sitting next to the victim.

However, even during this business trip, a recurring question arose: where on earth did she acquire her outstanding medical skills, which might as well be called such?

The past of the detective known as 'The Forgetful Detective' is shrouded in mystery.

Speaking of being shrouded—

Ms. Kyoko's current fashion (past three in the morning) is unmistakably pajamas. Pink, loose-fitting silk pajamas, at that. One wouldn't expect a detective to be solving mysteries in such attire. No matter how comfortable the overnight bus is, this is taking relaxation too far.

And with such a negligent appearance, she casts a stern gaze and suspiciously asks,

"Are you saying you're my slave—or rather, my employee?"

What was really annoying was her attitude towards her employees—does she think of her subordinates as slaves? No wonder new recruits are scarce at the Okitegami Detective Agency.

Am I a slave to a slave to money?

"Do you have proof? Where's the proof?"

"Probably around your abs..."

No identification cards are issued to employees (perhaps to make it easier to cut ties when necessary).

Ms. Kyoko turns her back to me, seemingly lifting the hem of her pajama top—just as her own profile (stating "I am Kyoko Okitegami. A detective") is written on her left arm, there is likely something similar written there, like:

'The giant's name is Mamoru Oyagiri. Bodyguard. My employees are my slaves. Do as you please with them.'

"..."

After reading her handwritten note—a sort of memorandum—Ms. Kyoko spins nimbly in the narrow aisle of the bus to face me again.

I had assumed that the hem of her top was already lowered since her arms were spread wide, but when Ms. Kyoko turned back, she was biting the hem with her lips, leaving her abdomen completely exposed.

Why such a provocative act?

Far from being careless, it was indecent.

But seeing the writing on her barely discernible abdominal muscles, I understood.

"The giant's name is Mamoru Oyagiri. Bodyguard," my prediction was spot on, but the text that followed was different.

It continued with "My employees are my treasure. He's priceless"-a line typical of a tsundere?

"If you're a treasure, then you must be protected. Especially if you're claimed to be priceless."

Letting go of the hem she was biting, Ms. Kyoko spoke—it seemed that this time, it was I who would be protected by Ms. Kyoko.

4

Nevertheless, it's reasonable that I was suspected of being the culprit, akin to a certain young man prone to wrongful accusations—I had to be seen as the first suspect by the detective with the fastest reasoning.

So, unlike that young man prone to false charges, it's fortunate that the suspicion was cleared before the police arrived—well, at present, the suspicion hasn't been completely dispelled.

Just because I am considered Ms. Kyoko’s treasure, it does not equal the fact that I am not the culprit—both titles can coexist. There is no rule stating that the "prime suspect" cannot be the "unexpected culprit."

"Rest assured. Even if you, Mr. Mamoru, were the culprit, I would defend you with all my might."

There were ethical issues with the way Ms. Kyoko guarded her treasures.

"For the honor of our office—or rather, the honor of the master detective!"

"Today's Ms. Kyoko" tends to use "or rather" quite frequently. If anything, that would be a dishonor, and preferably, I would like Ms. Kyoko to use her intellect not for covering up scandals but for identifying the real criminal.

Let’s organize the situation for that purpose.

I was sitting around the middle of the sightseeing bus "High-Speed Road"—to be precise, in seat 5B.

The victim was in the window-side seat 5A.

The bus seats were arranged with three on each side of the aisle, with seat 5C to my right—however, that seat was empty.

Thus, I gratefully placed some luggage there (not mine, but Ms. Kyoko’s).

Continuing across the aisle, there are seats 5D, 5E, 5F, and so on—with rows up to the tenth, which, when counted, means that a maximum of sixty people can ride on the first floor.

Quite a large group.

This count slyly does not include the driver or the bus guide like a trick question, but it is not incorrect—the driver's seat is on the second floor, and the female guide generally stays on the second floor as well.

So, the second-floor seating, where I currently am, has a few less seats—could it be said that this is a super-large bus that can carry up to about a hundred passengers in total?

This would almost make it an articulated bus—although, just like the seat next to me was empty, it was not fully occupied.

In reality, including children (and of course, crew members), there were about seventy people on board.

Excluding the victim, sixty-nine people.

Therefore, if one considers the bus a "moving closed room," then all sixty-nine people inside are suspects—but still, the first to be suspected was me, simply because I was seated next to the victim.

Essentially, there was a very small closed-room structure there, with me acting as the door to the closed room.

The victim had been strangled with the seatbelt of his own seat (seat 5A)—was he targeted while reading a novel? A book lay open on his lap, and his tragic figure was illuminated by the reading light.

If it weren't for that light, the patrolling bus guide might not have discovered him so quickly—did reading save his life, in a way?

To think that such a terrifying crime occurred right beside me while I was sound asleep, speaks to how carefree I am—but to be serious, it's a failure as a bodyguard. I may have said that the victim was not the subject of my protection, but that doesn't cut it.

In other words, structurally speaking on the bus, the only one who could have strangled the victim was me—if any of the other sixty-eight suspects (including the famous detective) intended to strangle the victim to death, they would have had to boldly step over me, who was sleeping soundly.

No, it's not just about stepping over; while they were strangling, they would have had to sit on my legs—that's the question, is it even possible?

Even if I were an unguarded and unsuspecting bodyguard, could a murder take place on top of me without my noticing?

...Well, it might be possible.

I cannot say with absolute certainty that such a thing is impossible because I do not have that much confidence in myself—after all, it's true that I was exhausted by a journey constantly being tossed about by a tyrannical boss.

It cannot be denied that I was in a deep sleep, one that a little disturbance wouldn't wake me from—but that's my circumstances, not the culprit's.

It seems highly unlikely that among the customers boarding this tour bus, there is anyone who knows that I am the slave (or treasure) of a famous detective, utterly exhausted—the fact that I can only rest when we are separated by gender (and from now on, I won't be able to) would require someone to have been watching over our journey the entire time.

To an outsider, I'm just a man sleeping on a night bus.

Even if one were to call it luxury, who would think to murder someone over a sleeping person...? In all probability, I would wake up and foil the attempt.

"That's true. Especially since you're a giant,"

said Ms. Kyoko.

"If you disturb a giant's sleep and incur his wrath, you'd better be ready for retribution."

I seem to have become someone who suppresses criminals not out of a sense of justice, but because my sleep was disturbed... Ms. Kyoko's image of me is vague.

That's natural given we've just met.

But this is just an exaggeration, not an untruth—if the one sleeping there were a petite girl, it'd be bad enough to try and murder someone over her, but who in their right mind would step over a nearly two-meter-tall man to carry out a murder?

It would be a different story if someone had a deep grudge against him and this was the only chance he had to kill his mortal enemy... But no matter how you slice it, inside a tour bus doesn't seem like the chance of a lifetime.

"That's true. It would be even more so if the victim was reading rather than sleeping—if they had trouble falling asleep, unlike you, Mr. Mamoru—"

Ms. Kyoko seemed to be thinking as she spoke, as usual.

Hoping to help, I ventured,

"Could it be a crime for money, if not out of spite?"

"For instance, if the victim was secretly transporting a large amount of cash—hiding a hefty check in their breast pocket, and the perpetrator, while attempting to steal it, was discovered, and in a panic, strangled the victim—"

"If the victim had been asleep, that theory might hold water—no, we can't say for certain that he wasn't asleep. They could have been reading and dozed off."

I see.

Just because the reading light was on doesn't mean they were definitely awake—then.

"By the way, upon searching the victim's belongings, it seemed like they were traveling alone. They had no companions on the bus, nor did it appear they were transporting any large checks."

Searching.

The detective had acted like a thief—saving lives while also rifling through luggage, truly commendable for the fastest detective.

So, it wasn't the case about fighting with a companion either.

That's not good.

This means that the most plausible "motive" might end up being that I, in the neighboring seat, had an altercation with them—making the seat belt, a makeshift weapon, seem like it supports the idea of a spontaneous and impulsive crime.

"Mr. Mamoru. I'm not suspecting you, but if it were you, it would help if you could tell me now, before the police arrive. There's still a chance to protect you."

That's tantamount to saying there's a chance for a cover-up...

"No, no, please spare me, Ms. Kyoko. I do feel sorry for the victim, but I haven't exchanged a single word with him..."

" 'Him'? That's strange. I haven't said yet that the victim was a man."

"That sounds like a line befitting a master detective."

But since he was sitting next to me, even without talking, I would know... After all, it was a men's seat on the first floor.

How could there be a scuffle with someone I've truly "just met" for the first time? You often hear about people being "in the same boat", though I suppose it would be "in the same bus" here, but that's more about unity, not about people killing each other...

"It might not have been about being in the same boat. Perhaps it was just about the elbow."

"The elbow?"

"Yes, the armrest—you know, the struggle for the armrest that happens in trains or movie theaters when you're seated next to someone."

Ah—I get what she's trying to say.

'Come on, it's unthinkable that such a quarrel over an armrest could lead to murder'—or so one might say. Although it may not escalate to homicide, it's not entirely unheard of for a trivial "armrest scuffle" to develop into a fistfight.

Over something like that?

Such a motive seems to be a fine line away from being an "unexpected motive"—but, in the case at hand, it's not a possibility that needs to be considered.

Because I am a coward who stays out of those kinds of disputes—whether it's on a train, in a movie theater, or even on a sightseeing bus. To avoid conflict with the person next to me (even

if it doesn't lead to a dispute, just to avoid the mutual discomfort), I have decided not to use the armrest from the start.

I think of it as a partition—a border line that delineates our personal space. I'm so thorough that I won't use the armrest of an adjacent empty seat either, quite commendable of myself.

Normally, in such cases, I would fold away the armrest to expand my personal space—although this was not possible in the High Speed Road sightseeing bus, as the table is stored inside the fixed armrests.

"Ah, I see. You're considerate of others' comfort, my treasure," Ms. Kyoko said, looking impressed as she continued, "Speaking of manners, in movie theaters they show those etiquette ads before the screening that say 'Please don't kick the seat in front of you,' but are there really people who do such a thing? Kicking a seat... what could possibly be the meaning of that... a grudge against the chair, perhaps?"

This is bad, her deductive reasoning is starting to veer off in a strange direction—it's my job on this journey to quickly get us back on track when this happens.

"Kicking is an exaggerated term. It's essentially a polite request to 'Please make sure your feet don't touch the seat in front of you.' It's like saying, 'You may not intend it, but the person in front feels as if they're being kicked.' It's akin to other gentle reminders such as 'Please hold the handrail on the escalator (do not walk on the escalator)' or 'Thank you for always keeping the restroom clean (please keep the toilet clean).'"

"I see. It's a roundabout way of reinforcing basic manners since being directly preemptive can be unpleasant to some. So it's not preemptive but rather a long-winded way of communicating—hmm."

With that, Ms. Kyoko took a seat nearby. Judging by the seat number, it shouldn't be hers—but without fuss, she stretched out her legs there.

What's she up to?

"It's a test to see if I can actually kick the seat in front of me. But I can't reach. It doesn't seem like such a kick could cause a dispute with the person in the front seat. Or could your long legs reach, Mr. Mamoru?"

I wonder if they could. Even if my legs could reach—based on what I remember, the victim was of average height and build. It doesn't seem likely that someone would go to such lengths to kick the seat in front... there wouldn't be any reason for that much effort.

First of all, from the front seat, the back of that very chair would hinder any attempt to strangle the victim—unable to break through the small, enclosed space.

"But that's not the case. When you speak of a 'small enclosed space,' you're only referring to the state in which the 'body' was found," said Ms. Kyoko.

"If the person in the front seat reclined their backrest all the way, that wall could be overcome."

"Ah—right you are."

It might not be a blind spot, or perhaps it is just too simple that one wonders why it didn't occur to them once it's pointed out.

The mechanism is as simple as deducing that the giant sitting next to the victim must be the culprit, but indeed, with just a press of a button, the constructed locked room would collapse.

"It's possible to target the moment you go to the restroom, but since you were sound asleep, Mr. Mamoru, we can probably eliminate that possibility."

"Hmm. So, does that mean we narrow down the suspects to the person sitting in the seat in front of us?"

If you're saying that the crime is impossible for anyone but the person in the front seat, excluding myself, then that's what it comes down to—eliminate all the absolutely impossible possibilities, and the last remaining possibility, no matter how improbable, is the truth, right?

"That would just be a normal process of elimination. The correct saying is, 'Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.'"

If that's the case, then applying that famous adage here would be off the mark—since the passenger in the front seat being the culprit would be an exceedingly logical deduction.

Let's see, who was sitting in the front seat again—huh?

"Um, Ms. Kyoko..."

"Did you notice? Yes, the seat in front of the victim was empty, just like the one your right, Mr. Mamoru."

That's right—I remembered considering moving to the window seat in the front row when I stood up for something because it was vacant.

But since the B and C seats were occupied, I didn't feel like climbing over two people to get to the window, and in the end, I refrained from moving.

"Oh dear, is that so? Mr. Mamoru, you truly are a considerate gem—priceless. But anyway, the row behind was arranged opposite the one in front. Some people prefer window seats, others the aisle, and there are those who prefer the middle seat. Everyone has their own preferences."

"I don't think there are that many people who actually prefer the middle seat... You're very good at glossing over slip-ups. So... what does this mean?"

Even if it's an empty seat, the logic that reclining the backrest of seat 4A could break through the locked room stands firm—thus, any passenger who could have moved to that seat had the opportunity to kill the victim.

The suspect list is still all sixty-nine passengers... No.

That can't be right.

It's the same reason why I wasn't moved.

It would be risky to cross over passengers in seats C and B to get to seat A—if the culprit was the passenger in seat 4C, he would only need to climb over one person, but that doesn't seem easy.

What if the passenger in seat B was the culprit? Then no one would need to climb over anyone—but still, another problem arises.

The initial suspicion of the passenger in the front seat was based on the assumption that the victim's manners, like kicking the backrest or something similar, had become a motive.

You can't kick the backrest of seat B from the rear seat A.

The fundamental part of the motive for the crime doesn't hold up... Plus, even if the passenger in seat B whimsically moved temporarily to seat A, it would still be difficult to kick the seat in front of him, unless he was as big as me...?

"If we pursue possibilities to the extreme, we could consider as culprit the passenger in seat 3A, two rows in front of you. He reclined his own seat, first moved to the vacant seat 4A, and then reclined that seat's backrest too—a 'double door' strategy."

"That kind of action would surely be too conspicuous... Someone would notice."

Whether someone notices or not, it's a step that can't be taken without considering the possibility of being seen—plus, if it's hard to kick the seat in front, how is the victim supposed to kick the seat two rows ahead?

"Indeed. So, there's only one possibility left. No matter how improbable it may seem."

"M-Me as the culprit?"

"Include that, and you have two possibilities. But I’m counting that as one of the unlikely ones."

Despite everything, she trusts in me. Perhaps it was because she took that memo at face value, but had I really done something to earn such high praise from "yesterday's Ms. Kyoko"?

So, what remained was...

"No way—through the window?"

"I hadn't even counted that as a possibility... Strangling someone from the window of a bus speeding down the highway. Do you think the criminal is a ninja, Mr. Mamoru?"

Ms. Kyoko said with an incredulous look (a guarantee that the memo in her stomach would be rewritten), then added:

"If not the front, then it's the back. The passenger in the sixth row, seat A—that's the possibility we should start considering now."

5

'I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning'—though she didn't say so outright, her tone suggested she had seen through to the actual facts of the case as if they were clear from the beginning. I wanted to interject with pure, unadulterated skepticism, like "Why didn't you say so from the start?" or "What was the point of doubting me?" But this is the essence of the exhaustive reasoning by the forgetful detective, so what can you do.

Even if the truth is clear, there are times when one must take a roundabout route—that is, in order to highlight the essence, it's the same as saying, "Please don't kick the seat in front."

Of course.

It's precisely because she went through those steps that the statement "The passenger in the back seat is the criminal" didn't feel abrupt. Rather, it made sense.

It clicked into place.

At the very least, I was spared the classic reaction of "That's ridiculous! What do you mean, Ms. Kyoko?"

In other words, there isn't just one way to dismantle the walls of a small closed room.

It could be that the passenger in the front reclines their seat, or perhaps the criminal takes advantage of a moment when I moved—it could be a ninja aiming from a gap in the window, or even more boldly, someone from the upper deck breaking through the ceiling (floor)... and to put it more simply, the victim could have been targeted when reclining their seat, which is not out of the question.

In this case, it's not just the collapse of a closed room; the victim is practically offering their neck to the criminal—it's as defenseless as I was, fast asleep in the seat next to them.

Ms. Kyoko had said it.

The seating in the rear row is the exact opposite of the front—meaning someone is sitting in the window-side A seat, with B and C seats empty.

This could be considered an ideal seating arrangement—the risk of witnessing the crime isn't nonexistent (as it's unlikely that the opposite D to F seats across the aisle would all be empty), but it's reduced... reduced, at least to the point where one might lose self-control.

A seat belt as an impromptu weapon.

An impulsive crime.

...But thanks to the thorough buildup, I was not shocked, though it left a somewhat unsatisfactory aftertaste.

No, it's not that the aftertaste is bad, but rather it lacks flavor—as if the beauty and magnificence of paintings and sculptures were explained away with "golden ratio" or "market price"... Yes, it's logic without emotion.

If you're sitting in the back, sure, you could kill the person who reclines into you from the front seat, but that's all there is to it. It glosses over questions like "Why was the person killed?"—the motive has been completely removed.

It is fair to say that there are none.

Furthermore, the victim's actions are puzzling.

As mentioned before, it's as if he willingly offered their neck to the criminal—seats A in the fifth row and A in the sixth row.

What kind of connection was there between them?

A seat in the back is much more difficult to kick than a seat in the front—you'd have to twist space itself.

"Or perhaps the passenger in seat 6A kicked the back of seat 5A? And the victim, angered by the breach of manners, reclined their seat to confront the passenger in seat 6A—only to be overpowered in return."

"If there had been such a scuffle, you'd surely have woken up as the neighbor, Mr. Mamoru,"

Ms. Kyoko said indifferently.

"And then, there's no explanation for the victim's seat being in the normal position when he was discovered."

That's right... there's that too.

In fact, the victim's seat wasn't reclined at all; on the contrary, there were even signs that he had been reading a book.

I assumed that he had been attacked while reading, but not while lying down... even if it was conceivable he fell asleep during reading, I hadn't thought the seat would be reclined.

A seat that's nearly full-flat...

"There's only one logic that explains that situation—the victim was reclining and sleeping, and was strangled unawares. In their confused state, he would thrash about—realizing he was being attacked from behind, he would try to raise the seat to avoid it. In that moment, perhaps he made a mistake and pressed a different button—"

The reading light turned on.

So that's what happened—afterwards, he somehow managed to raise the seat, but it was already too late.

What about the book he was reading?

"It would be correct to assume that the book at hand ended up in such a state by chance while thrashing about, but perhaps that book wasn't the victim's in the first place. Taking advantage of the reading light coming on, the perpetrator might have thrown their own book from over the seat."

"..."

A trick to make it look as if the victim hadn't reclined their seat at the time of the crime—a minor trick for a small closed room.

As for closed-room tricks, it's rather sloppy, but it's more plausible than a bold plan that involves breaking through the ceiling (or floor) to attack the victim from the second floor (or perhaps a ninja plan).

Still, even though this explanation might account for the phenomenon, it still doesn't explain the motive—"I killed the person in front because their reclining seat was in reach and I could kill them." Should such an eccentric motive be assumed?

A trick for the sake of a trick, a motive for the sake of a motive—

"There must have been a motive, right? It's about manners, after all,"

"But then, there's no line of reasoning that the retaliation for being kicked from behind ended in being overpowered, right? And fighting over the armrest is even less likely—"

"Share the armrests, and don't kick the seat in front of you. But, if we talk about typical manners in such a vehicle, there's another one that comes up, right?"

With the hint that it's a manner not often heard in movie theaters, the answer was immediately clear. Well, it's clear now, but it's not like it was "immediately," let alone "the fastest."

"When reclining your seat, you're supposed to speak to the person behind you first—right?"

Classic.

Indeed, it's rare for seats in movie theaters to recline, but in trains, planes, and on buses like this—if "sharing armrests" is a consideration for the person in the adjacent seat, and "not kicking the seat in front" is a consideration for the person in the front seat, then "not reclining the seat without warning" is a courtesy for the person in the seat behind.

Actually, because doing so can cause someone to hit their head or things on the table to fall, it can be a source of trouble—might even have a higher rate of causing trouble than "sharing armrests" or "not kicking."

So, is this what it boils down to?

The victim reclined their seat without any warning—and that provoked the passenger in seat 6A, who then committed the act.

It sounds more impulsive than premeditated, but still, it's a plausible scenario... not that one would kill over it, but everyone has experienced annoyance at a seat in front reclining abruptly.

But still....

"No, but, that's strange, Ms. Kyoko. Inside this tour bus 'High-Speed Road'... I mean, look, every seat reclines almost to a full-flat position, right?"

"Yes, that's true."

"The tables are also the type that are stored in the armrests, and even if the seat is reclined to its maximum, it won't bother the person in the seat behind. There's no risk of hitting one's head or having things on the table fall over... It's like not being able to reach the front seat with your feet; don't you think this eliminates the potential for trouble?"

"I don't think so."

Ms. Kyoko asserted with conviction.

"Some people don't consider whether an actual inconvenience occurred as a problem—because there are those who don't see it as an issue."

"...What do you mean?"

I really didn't understand and simply asked again—then the forgetful detective said,

"You know how there's a way of getting angry that goes, 'I'm not mad about what you did, I'm mad that you did it without saying anything.' It's the same thing here—not whether the reclining caused an inconvenience, but the perpetrator was angry that he wasn't asked for permission before reclining the seat."

He was angered by having the seat reclined on him without any prior notice.

Because he felt belittled.

6

The case was temporarily resolved with the arrival of the police, when a passenger in seat 6A confessed to attempted murder—thanks to Ms. Kyoko's persuasion. According to her, "It was easy to persuade him because a large man was standing silently beside me"—though "persuasion" and "persuasive tactics" carry quite different connotations, well, let's leave it at that.

At least regarding the perpetrator, it seemed that "he" was definitely the one—since there was no time for a detailed interrogation, it wasn't possible to cross-check the motive.

Perhaps there was a deep grudge between the perpetrator and the victim—something like an encounter that comes once in a hundred years steeped in bloodied vendettas, which would be far more comforting to consider than the motives described by Ms. Kyoko.

It's not that I don't understand.

It's that I struggle to comprehend.

It's not about the outcome or conclusion, but valuing the process and procedures... valuing the emotional aspect over the actual harm.

But, in reality, we are constantly getting angry or indignant about things that don't concern us in our everyday lives—casually saying "I can't forgive that person" about someone who hasn't done anything to us nor caused us any inconvenience.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

If we just dismiss anything that doesn't bother us personally, no sense of justice or spirit of mutual aid would arise—it's two sides of the same coin.

To put it extremely, even the feeling of "I can't forgive" the perpetrator of an incident reported on the news could be seen as "Why are you angry when it doesn't concern you?"—but such righteous indignation can lead to unjustified bashing or excessive reporting.

What I'm trying to say is, the perpetrator's thoughtless violence disrupted our way home, and at a service area in the middle of the night, Ms. Kyoko and I had to search for an alternative route... However, I wouldn't say that we were inconvenienced by this. Nor would I wish for a manners advertisement to be put out saying, "Please don't kill people on the bus." It is more than just whether or not a case happens wherever a master detective goes, because it is a matter of course that a case happens in the vehicle that a criminal rides in.

[redacted]

掟上今日子の五線譜（序曲）

[redacted]

The Musical Score of Kyoko Okitegami (Overture)

1

After returning home from a journey, what's the first thing one does? Maybe it's sorting through the mail that's piled up during one's absence, tidying up the suitcase, laundering the clothes brought back, sorting the souvenirs purchased, checking if the house is just as it was left, cleaning up the mess made while packing, catching up on local news, letting concerned parties know of one's safe return, or perhaps jotting down the travel experiences—however, taking a shower and collapsing into bed with a thud, utterly exhausted, is certainly one of the correct answers, too.

So, how did it go for the forgetful detective and his bodyguard upon their return, after a long spell of business activities, to the Okitegami Detective Agency—affectionately known as the Okitegami Building? The "shower" and the "thud" part were taken care of by the detective, while the bodyguard was left to handle all the other tasks.

"I'll take a good rest, so Mr. Mamoru, please take care of the post-trip tasks thoroughly," said Ms. Kyoko with a smile, as if this division of labor was perfectly fair.

There was no hesitation.

"Creating a company like a family was my dream. It's a wonderful thing to have someone to say goodnight to. So then, goodnight, Mr. Mamoru."

If one were to express the feelings of the person on the receiving end of that goodnight, this division of labor meant that I was far from being able to rest yet... But after being told such things by someone with a freshly bathed, egg-smooth complexion, there's no room for retort—what's this about a company like a family?

There is quite a lot of mental domestic violence going on in this household... but to begin with, I've never really understood the point of washing Ms. Kyoko's clothes again and again, as she never wears them more than once.

Well, it's fine.

Even so, as I'm not capable of multitasking, I can't start by doing everything at once, so I'll have to proceed one by one... For starters, let's begin by sorting out the mail.

The Okitegami Detective Agency, which upholds the utmost confidentiality, fundamentally does not accept commission via letters, which could serve as physical evidence... Hence, checking the mail is my task, not just today upon returning from travel. There's a non-negligible chance that a criminal, exposed by the forgetful detective, might send a bomb out of spite, and that's

why I perform the role of a taster... Reading Ms. Kyoko's letters before she does could be considered censorship, or perhaps an invasion of privacy, though I can't say I haven't thought of it that way,

"I have no privacy,"

is what the detective, bound by strict confidentiality, would say.

Nevertheless, there has been no cause for alarm so far, but from here on, I'll gradually start to regain my senses... With Ms. Kyoko retiring to bed, it means that from tomorrow, the usual operations of the Okitegami Detective Agency, led by the director who has completely forgotten about the trip, will commence.

Surely I can't remain in vacation mode forever... It seems that the bulk of what's been dropped off without pause are just advertising flyers. Of course, given the detective's nature, it's rare for thank-you notes from past clients to arrive... Come to think of it, there was a time when a letter saying "I've reformed" arrived from a criminal, not out of spite but rather appreciation?

"That's the real thrill of being a famous detective,"

Ms. Kyoko said with genuine sentiment, and of course, followed up with,

"But, what crime did this person commit again?"

In fact, when I'm in charge of checking the mail like this, I'm painfully aware that the forgetful detective truly has no privacy—neither privacy nor family.

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

Considering that, one might start to wonder how much meaning there was in this whole series of trips—could it be possible that the scope of work for the inwardly focused Okitegami Detective Agency has expanded due to this round of business activities?

As I was about to be engulfed in a fatigue different from that of travel weariness, I finished checking the mail that had arrived during my absence—huh?

What is this...?

A pink envelope with a heart-shaped wax seal... A fan letter?

"At last we meet, Mr. Oyagiri. However, now that we are face to face, it seems somewhat difficult to say 'nice to meet you', doesn't it?"

Behind the bars, Mr. Yakusuke Kakushidate smiled wryly—sitting on a simple bed, legs crossed, and hunching slightly as he faced this way. Despite his considerable size, there was an undeniable presence in his gaze looking up from below.

In a certain police station's underground holding cells.

He is a frequent and unique "client" of the Okitegami Detective Agency—but it seems that he has been caught up in a false charge again, just when I took my eyes off him.

"Don't worry. For me, the holding cell is like a villa. Among all the police stations, this one is quite comfortable. I might even call it a favorite. Heh. It's just a pity that I have missed the final episodes of the dramas I was following this season."

He carries an air of a serious criminal—maybe it's just bravado, but such an attitude only deepens the suspicions against him.

"However, having time to think in a closed space like this might be necessary for a man like me. From inside the cage, you can see that it is the world that is really trapped—in the cage of common sense."

Why then act like a great criminal?

The False Accusations King.

"By the way, on what charge are you here for this time?"

On what false charges, eh?

Indeed, it would be awkward to start with the first meeting pleasantries now, so I probed from there... The Okitegami Detective Agency, though unofficial, has a strong connection with the police, hence this secret meeting was possible. But considering Mr. Kakushidate's situation, where he is not even allowed to move to the visitor's room, it seems it's not a petty crime.

"According to Officer Hada who's in charge, I've violated the Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Good grief. I thought I had mastered the Japanese laws long ago, but it seems there are things I've overlooked—I didn't even know such a law existed until I was arrested."

"Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species...?"

I don't know it either. What is that?

"It seems I've also violated the Washington Convention—simply put, they say I was plotting to smuggle elephant tusks."

Mr. Kakushidate shrugged. That gesture of his...

"I had always thought that dealing in stolen ivory was the domain of professional criminals. I suppose my only crime is my ignorance. It's quite unexpected. I, who wept reading 'Faithful Elephants' in my boyhood, would not be involved in the trading of ivory."

"..."

His attitude is very much like that of a major criminal.

This man, with his demeanor, makes me suspect that he has been dodging the law by making detectives complicit in finding scapegoats to take his place in the past—his character makes even someone unsuspecting like me think so. Is this his so-called false accusation nature?

Experiencing this in person, indeed, it's different...

"So... is it that you want our Kyoko to clear you of this Law for the Conservation of Endangered Species?"

"No, no, as much as I'd like to request her assistance, unfortunately, this charge is not the type of false accusation that can be resolved in a day or two. I've already requested the help of a famous detective who specializes in smuggling cases... Did I forget to mention that in my letter?"

'If that's the case, I apologize', Mr. Kakushidate said as he bowed his head within the cage—the bowing of a man who thinks nothing of bowing to others, whether in or out of a cage. No, it's not that I came rushing over to Mr. Kakushidate's side, thrilled at the prospect of a new job—it's not my case, after all.

My job is that of a security guard and bodyguard.

As if it were a fan letter, I came to this detention center to confirm the true intentions behind that elusive letter, to preemptively eliminate any danger approaching my boss.

But to think that my first job after returning from a trip would be an encounter with the infamous Mr. Kakushidate—hmm. But when exactly was that envelope dropped in our office's mail slot? It seemed to be placed quite at the bottom... I was so caught up in its content that I failed to check the postmark, unfortunately.

"A pink envelope? A heart-shaped wax seal? Good grief, that was a prank by Officer Hada. That's exactly how he's like. I asked him to let me send one letter in exchange for my peaceful capture..."

The handwriting was different from what I knew of Mr. Kakushidate's—so that was why... it seems that the letter was written by an investigator named Officer Hada, dictating Mr. Kakushidate's words. That's probably one of the reasons why it was hard to discern his true intentions—Mr. Kakushidate wanted to convey a message to Ms. Kyoko in a way that wouldn't be understood by Officer Hada.

So why do such a suspicious thing... If you use a coded message when trying to communicate with the outside, it's like asking to have your detention period extended.

"If extending the detention period means you can have interactions with you, Mr. Oyagiri, then it's all good, right?"

Making a joke about detention and interaction in a detention center... That's too bold.

"Though, I was hoping that Ms. Kyoko would come to see me. I heard she was traveling, so instead of a call, I tried to reach out with a letter..."

"Eh... why do you know that our Kyoko was traveling?"

"Information comes in even to a place like this. Or should I say, especially in a place like this?"

And there was Mr. Kakushidate, with an air of composure.

"It seems you were quite active in various places. Your adventures had me on the edge of my seat."

"..."

Well, it's not impossible for such gossip to circulate and reach this detention center after having so many encounters with police agencies during the trip... But let alone suspicious, it's starting to get creepy.

I decided it was necessary to eliminate any threat to Ms. Kyoko, and no sooner had I finished checking the mail than I managed to get a meeting in such a relaxed manner. Perhaps my judgment was a bit hasty. I shouldn't have tried to act like the fastest security guard... The "threat" emanating from this man, even through the bars, is clearly more than I can handle. I should have waited until the weariness from the trip had worn off... In that sense, the "drop-dead" decision of the forgetful detective was clearly the only lucid one.

It is because she rests when she rests that she's able to maintain the fastest performance at all times... It seems that not everything can be solved just by moving around as one pleases.

"Let's get to the point, Mr. Kakushidate."

I somewhat forcefully steered the conversation toward the main issue.

By speaking in such a way, it's as if I had already lost... It doesn't seem like Mr. Kakushidate is interested in competing, though.

"What do you mean that there is 'a letter that you must pass on to Ms. Kyoko'? Saying 'Please come to see me as soon as you read this letter because I want to hand over this other letter'... If you really have such a letter, why not just mail it instead—"

A "letter about wanting to hand over a letter" has a nesting structure, it's very much like Mr. Kakushidate—especially the part about "wanting to hand it over in person," I could only think that he had other aims.

The only thing I can think of is that he is deliberately trying to lure the oblivious detective into a trap by saying something suggestive... and even more so when such a letter is sent out from inside the detention centre.

" 'If you really have such a letter'... I see, you're suspecting me. I'm sure I'm the only one to be further falsely accused while I'm in jail."

Mr. Kakushidate brushed off my eagerness with his ever-unchanging pace... or rather,

"However, I must confess, it is also true that I cannot fully trust you, Mr. Oyagiri. Whether or not it is appropriate to entrust you with the letter to Ms. Kyoko—I wonder if you are qualified to receive the help that someone of such renown, not poor me, asked for from Ms. Kyoko?"

He insinuated with a look that seemed to gaze up from beneath.

The young man with the incessantly roundabout way of speaking—was he essentially saying that unless it was Ms. Kyoko herself, he had no intention of handing over the letter or explaining the situation? What twisted fan psychology.

"A slight correction. I admit that I am a twisted fan. However, I would like to test you, if you don't mind the presumption—Mr. Oyagiri. Whether you are fit to act as Ms. Kyoko's proxy. Allow me to present you with a riddle. If within the visiting hours, you can provide an answer-without necessarily being the fastest—I will gladly entrust you with the letter in question"

After all, this riddle was once solved by the Forgetful Detective.

3

"Uraotoshima is a real place.

"It might not appear on all maps, but it's an isolated island in the sea off the coast of the Hokuriku region, roughly twelve kilometers square.

"No, it's not uninhabited.

"It's a populated island with eighty-eight residents.

"From the perspective of someone involved in a deep line of business like ours, the mere mention of a 'remote island' immediately conjures the shallow assumption of a place that must have been used for exile in the past-much like Shokeijima, that you and Ms. Kyoko visited during your travels—but the purpose of Uraotoshima was quite different, diverging from the typical mystery genre setting.

"Are you familiar with Venetian glass?

"No, no, I'm sure you are. It was in the water closet of the Okitegami Detective Agency—I've had the pleasure of using it in the reception room many times.

"The art that once flourished in the Venetian Republic, and because of its value, great efforts were made to prevent the export of its manufacturing techniques.

"By relocating all the talented glassmakers to an island named Murano, conducting all the production processes there, and forbidding them from leaving-Uraotoshima was based on a similar concept.

"What was being made there was not glass, but musical instruments—it was a place designed to sequester instrument craftsmen.

"You may consider nearly all of the eighty-eight islanders to be craftsmen—or rather, a family of craftsmen.

"In the past, they only made traditional Japanese instruments like the koto, wadaiko, and shamisen, but lately, they've broadened their scope to include Western instruments like pianos, violins, and trumpets.

"They may not be Stradivarius, but...

"Still, they are more esteemed internationally than domestically, a sort of hidden gem rather than a hidden island, I suppose—their low profile probably stems from that.

"After all, in this day and age, the island doesn't even have cell phone antennas, let alone Wi-Fi-there are no regular ferry services, it's completely private property. Perhaps that's why it was chosen as a sequestered island... Although, I must say, while the initial establishment might have been one thing, nowadays it's touted as an idyllic haven of welfare and benefits for craftsmen.

"Certainly, the idea that it's inconvenient without a smartphone might just be our biased view—'limiting what you can do as much as possible' might be an important aspect for craftsmanship, and perhaps for seekers as well.

"Surprisingly, the philosophy of Uraotoshima may be just that... not about technological leaks. As an employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency who detests information leaks above all else, couldn't this story be of some interest to you?

"Excuse me, I've let the preamble drag on.

"When you're in a detention cell with nothing to do, all you can do is think. So, like Ms. Kyoko, you end up running through deductions... The incident occurred on this island without even a police box.

"Of course, it was a murder case."

4

"It all started when one of the eighty-eight islanders went missing... Let's call him Mr. Tsumuji, a contrabass craftsman for argument's sake.

"While he may not be called a leading figure, he was a skilled maestro, and there were more than one or two double bass players who claimed they could not perform without an 'instrument' crafted by him.

"However, unable to defy the encroaching years, he was primarily involved in training his juniors at that time... Yet suddenly, Mr. Tsumuji disappeared.

"Strange, isn't it?

"After all, as mentioned earlier, it is a remote island in the middle of the sea—'deciding to leave the island on a whim without anyone knowing' would be virtually impossible. Even if he were a master craftsman, building a raft and escaping would be too risky. The island was searched thoroughly, but still, Mr. Tsumuji was nowhere to be found.

"Did he get lost in the mountains, or did he drown at sea?

"Both seem unlikely. He was an islander born and bred, and in a way, Uraotoshima was like his own backyard.

"People do get hurt in their own backyards, though.

"Plus, there were troubling signs.

"It's true he had been downcast since retiring—so you could understand why his disciples were worried he might have been contemplating something dire.

"Yet, even with an all-night search, Mr. Tsumuji was nowhere to be found—if he had given up on the world and thrown himself into the sea, the local currents would likely have washed him ashore on the island.

"While they were pondering this, one of the disciples noticed something about the contrabass case in the workshop.

"It was nothing really.

"It just seemed like the position it was placed in had slightly changed—or maybe that was just their imagination.

"'But maybe, just maybe.'

"'Maybe, inside this case—'

"Whether they thought it or not—indeed, a contrabass case seems large enough to hide a person inside.

"'At that moment, the pitch-black contrabass case looked to me like a coffin for the master'—that's what they claimed to have said, but that might just be an exaggeration.

"I'm not fond of such dramatic expressions.

"It was hard to believe that a well-known master craftsman would play such a game of hide-and-seek, but in any case, they unlocked it.

"And when they opened the case—inside was.

"Inside was, well, just an ordinary contrabass, one that Mr. Tsumuji had made.

"In the sense that it was his last creation, it was indeed a special contrabass, but finding a contrabass inside its case is as expected and not really indicative of anything having happened.

"It's like the opposite of a jumpscare you see in horror movies.

"It's like when you're terrified of finding a zombie and you tentatively open the closet door only to find a mannequin inside.

"The disciple probably breathed a sigh of relief—however, as with horror movies, this kind of reverse jumpscare usually has a second layer to it.

"Relaxation from tension, then a sudden, dramatic twist."

"From even further behind the mannequins, a horde of diminutive zombies could have sprung forth... or so the apprentice thought, as they felt a tinge of shame for his presumptions. Just before they closed the lid as it was originally, on a whim, they decided to take out the contrabass from its case.

"On a whim.

"'On a whim, due to a sense of discomfort—' they later explained, but well, perhaps that sensitivity is befitting of the disciple of a master?

"To tell just by looking, how remarkable.

"Anyone could have understood if they had taken it in their hands—the weight they would have felt when taking it out of the case was not that of a mere contrabass.

"It was not just that of a contrabass—clearly.

"Clearly, something was stuffed inside the contrabass.

"If it's said that a human can hide inside a contrabass case, then surely, inside the contrabass itself, a person could hide as well.

"They could hide, indeed.

"And so, inside that contrabass—yes, there it was.

"The strangled body of the late Mr. Tsumuji was crammed inside—the strings of the contrabass had been used as the murder weapon."

5

I said,

"Wait a moment... a body inside a contrabass?"

I interjected into Mr. Kakushidate's narration.

"But contrabasses, unlike guitars or lutes, surely..."

I'm not a musician, so this is merely knowledge gleaned from primary and middle school lessons...

"The body doesn't have any holes, does it?"

Though different in size, its structure should be like that of a violin or a shamisen.

No, even if, like a guitar or lute, there were a hole right in the center of the body, it would still be impossible to twist a human body through it...

"Strictly speaking, there is a hole—it's called the 'f-hole', and rather than a whole shape, it's more of a slit-like gap... but of course, one cannot push a human body through such a gap. In other words, this is what they call a 'locked-room' mystery—a closed system with a corpse inside."

Mr. Kakushidate spoke in a detached tone.

It was as if, in his life, locked-room mysteries were nothing more than common occurrences.

"In this case, would it be a double locked-room? Since the contrabass case was also locked... although the key to the case was kept in a place where anyone could take it, which makes it a somewhat weaker element of a locked-room."

"..."

Indeed, it's weak.

But, regardless of where the key was, the fact that it was locked from the outside is a crucial piece of information—it means that the feared suicide in despair is out of the question.

Someone had killed the craftsman and placed him in the contrabass case, closing the lid—and not content with just that, they had also enclosed him within the contrabass.

"If we consider the island itself as a locked room, then it's a triple locked-room. If we assume the cage of common sense, then, astonishingly, it's a quadruple locked-room—however, we must also properly consider that Uraotoshima operates under a different set of rules, being an isolated island."

'Now then', said Mr. Kakushidate.

It sounded like the line of a master detective—something Ms. Kyoko Okitegami would say after solving a case.

"That concludes the problem section, and here, instead of a challenge to the readers, it's a challenge to the security guards. The musical instrument manufacturer that owns Uraotoshima seeked to secretly and swiftly solve this murder case by reaching out to the Okitegami Detective Agency through a series of connections—needless to say, the Forgetful Detective solved this riddle in record time, within a day. Mr. Oyagiri, I would like you to do the same—if you say you've come to meet me as Ms. Kyoko Okitegami's proxy."

There seems to be an opinion that the intellectual level of a master detective's partner should be set low, but my view is different—a master detective and their partner should be equals.

Mr. Kakushidate straightened his stooped back for the first time there, and lifting his face, he spoke.

It might have been less the speech of a great criminal, and more that of a huge fan of Ms. Kyoko—did he have a face like this?

"Prove it to me. That you are someone who could be Ms. Kyoko's partner."

I can't say that I didn't think "why do I have to do such a thing?"—I almost blurted out, "try going on a long trip with that imperious boss," but I held back.

Because I could kind of see what the False Accusations King was going for. Indeed, I had become the sole employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency by going with the flow, and until now I had been convinced that my role was only to protect Ms. Kyoko, but from an outside perspective, that might not always be sufficient.

From a client's perspective, if I am a source of anxiety, then I myself could be said to be obstructing the business of the Forgetful Detective—so to gain trust, naturally, I must demonstrate a minimum level of ability.

This mystery, then, is something of a touchstone.

"Understood. Please give me a moment to think."

"By all means. However, you have only four minutes and thirty-three seconds of visiting time remaining."

I decided not to care about Mr. Kakushidate's roundabout way of speaking—not twenty-four hours, but a little over four minutes?

Well, it might be fair.

After all, investigating on that isolated island is a different matter—he's distilled it down and made it into a simple quiz, eliminating as much irrelevant information as possible. Since it presents a challenge to the reader, it's safe to assume that "all the necessary clues are in place" at this point.

In other words, this puzzle is not about "guessing the culprit."

Of the eighty-eight islanders, the only specific name that has come up is that of the victim, "Mr. Tsumuji," and that's probably a pseudonym (he's "旋", likely taken from the word "melody", or "旋律"). The disciple who becomes the first discoverer is also very abstract, as if they are the first discoverer as a concept, or the disciple as a concept-whether they are the murderer or not is of little importance in solving this mystery.

As Mr. Kakushidate emphasized, what's important is the locked room aspect surrounding the incident... We can disregard the locked room of the contrabass case.

What should be considered is the locked room nature of the contrabass itself.

Even if the size is fine, how in the world does one stuff a human into the sound cavity of a string instrument without any holes? This mystery feels very much like a magic trick, and truly has the feel of a mystery... moreover, it's either grotesque or obsessive... there's an undeniable eeriness.

Why do such a thing?

If the goal was merely to hide the body, then as the disciple first thought, hiding it inside the contrabass case would have been enough... why bother hiding it inside the contrabass itself? Because then the contrabass, once removed, would have to be moved somewhere else? But in a workshop for making instruments, it seems likely that there would be a storage room where one or two contrabasses could be hidden...

It's also dubious whether there was ever an intent to hide the body in the first place—if one wanted to be completely thorough, whatever modifications were made to the contrabass case, it should have been put back in its proper place.

Could it be that the culprit deliberately moved the contrabass case from its original position and set it back down to make it easier to find?

If so, what statement is being made?

But what kind of statement is stuffing a dead body into a contrabass... if this were a mystery novel, one might consider the line of nursery rhyme murders. If such a song were passed down on the island... no, if there were such a nursery rhyme (or a company song?), Mr. Kakushidate, as the storyteller, should be telling us.

Certainly, it's mystifying how Mr. Kakushidate knows the details of a murder case he didn't even get wrongfully accused of. He's truly a man with a mysterious network of information.

What would Ms. Kyoko think?

It's not about Mr. Kakushidate, but the contrabass locked room mystery—if I think as Ms. Kyoko's proxy, I have to think like her.

Consider all possibilities simultaneously with exhaustive reasoning... As a simple person like me, when a murder occurs, I'd guess there's a deep grudge or a shallow spite from the perpetrator to the victim, some kind of unavoidable trouble or an avoidable fate, but if that's not it.

What other possibilities are there?

Does putting a human inside a musical instrument improve its sound?

It's a bit late to say this, but frankly, the method to construct the contrabass locked room is simple—simple, or rather, there's only one method beyond comprehensive coverage.

Dismantle the contrabass, store the body of "Mr. Tsumuji" inside as if folding it up, and then reassemble the contrabass. It's exactly the opposite of how you assemble a ship in a bottle... And in this case, you don't need much skill to reassemble the instrument.

Well, it's an island of instrument craftsmen, so precise repair is possible if you say so, but you could even use varnish for painting as an adhesive to stick the disassembled parts back to their original shape if you like.

After all, once it's found out that a human (corpse) is hidden—whether by feel or by peeking through the sound holes—any calm and collected first responder, even without the sensitivity of a luthier, would decide to destroy the contrabass to check its contents.

If there's still a chance of revival, anyone would do it—a master detective like a deduction machine might prioritize preserving the scene, but at least Ms. Kyoko wouldn't.

In other words, since it's going to be destroyed anyway, there's no need for the repair to be perfect... rough and coarse will do.

The "on a whim" feeling of discomfort that the apprentice felt might just be that feeling of a facade, right? So in such a locked room, exhaustive reasoning is not necessary... I repeat, why was such a locked room necessary for this case? While it's customary in mystery novels to read a locked room as a metaphor or allegory, it's difficult without a hint.

Before the motive for the locked room, what's the motive for the murder?

Who benefits from killing a master craftsman—since it's not an active craftsman, it's not about aiming for a succession, then, is it the act of a disciple bearing a grudge from harsh mentoring? But that motive doesn't lead to seeking secrecy in a locked room... even if you hide the body in the contrabass, it's bound to be found eventually.

If you wanted to hide it, you'd throw the body into the sea—no, in that case, would it return to the island by the current? Then bury it in the mountains. They wanted to hide it temporarily, but needed it to be found later...? It doesn't quite fit.

"You don't have to consider the line of inheritance, Mr. Oyagiri. It's a commune, after all, the property is essentially shared. And it's not like Mr. Tsumuji had life insurance or anything."

As if he couldn't stand it any longer, with about two minutes left of visiting time, Mr. Kakushidate gave a hint—though it was the kind of hint that didn't seem like a hint.

I had abandoned that possibility at a very early stage... far from being for the property, the perpetrator composed a locked room that desecrated the property, or the inherited craftsmanship...

However, if it's neither resentment nor financial motive, then what's the remaining motive? A motiveless murder? Killing just because you want to kill, making a locked room just for fun, with no motive—well, given the form of the crime, that's not a farfetched conclusion...

"Was the burden a little too heavy?"

Certainly, I thought he was talking about the difficulty of a locked-room mystery, but the "False Accusations King" quietly continued, "As for you, protecting Ms. Kyoko is..."

"You might think that your job is to protect Ms. Kyoko and not to solve puzzles, but that's naive. If you continue like this, there will surely come a day when you'll regret, 'If only I had solved the mystery, I could have protected Ms. Kyoko.'"

"..."

I felt indignant that I had to be told so much by a man I had just met (telling me I'm naive when he himself is the one who ended up arrested), but perhaps he was right—it's too late once it's already happened.

"I don't want to say this, but do I have no choice but to say—'Please let me call a detective.' Not you."

If you don't want to say it, I wish you'd keep quiet—there's one minute left. For the fastest detective, it's far too long a time limit—what would Ms. Kyoko say at a time like this? During the journey, I've heard plenty of her saying whatever she wants—enough to make me sick, sick to the core.

Truly sick to the core. Sick to the point of utter disgust.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Kyoko Okitegami, detective"—"I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning"—"What did you just say?"—"What did you just say?"—

"—What did you just say?"

I asked back.

With a puzzled look, Mr. Kakushidate repeated, "There will surely come a day when you regret... is that it?" But that wasn't it.

It was before that.

"You mean 'it's not like Mr. Tsumuji had life insurance or anything'?"

If that's the case.

Who was insured?

6

Instead of asking "Who is it?" I should have asked "What is it?" That I couldn't do so is why I'm not a master detective.

However, I reached the conclusion.

The remote island sea, the monopolization of musical instrument craftsmen, such typical stage settings had become a distraction, but in essence, this murder case was for insurance money—a plain and tasteless murder for insurance money. However, the insurance was not on the life of the musical instrument craftsman, but on the instrument itself—the double bass, which should only have been a part of the locked-room mystery.

In other words, it wasn't that the instrument was sacrilegiously used to kill a person—it was that a person's life was used to destroy the instrument.

No one would think of that.

After all, a human life is heavier than the earth, so no one would prioritize a double bass disassembled for a locked-room trick or its strings used as a weapon—it's inevitably put second or third in importance.

But a valuable violin, even discounting its classical rarity, can be worth billions of yen, no joke—the kind of money that can easily lead to death. Even if they weren't after property, they were after money—that double bass had that kind of value. An amateur like me would think it should just be sold, but the fact that it's a good thing doesn't necessarily mean it will sell—that's another worldly truth.

To defraud cash not from within the community, but from an external insurance company... well, just listening vaguely, it was hard to believe in the existence of such a "Craftsman's Island," a place so detached from the world, but after all, being a craftsman means you can't ignore the accounting and financial management.

Even if Uraotoshima exists.

Utopia does not.

As if it could.

...Still, even if I can show understanding and pretend to compromise, it's difficult to completely share those values.

Because, whoever on the island the perpetrator was, whoever on the island the beneficiary of the insurance was, for this crime to be successful, it seems there had to be consent from the victim... otherwise, it wouldn't have gone so smoothly.

In a sense, it's close to suicide.

A master craftsman who had retired from the front lines prioritized the future of instrument-making over his own life—using one's life for a mislead, what kind of worldview did he live by? And by what kind of worldview did he die in?

The thought that the "Mr. Tsumuji" locked-room murder case was just the tip of the iceberg sent shivers down my spine, not of melody but of horror... what methods has their community used to maintain their organisation so far?

Common sense does not apply.

An occurrence outside the cage called common sense.

Of course, once the truth is revealed, there would be no insurance payout, but to what extent the parent instrument manufacturer understands that—the fact that Ms. Kyoko solved the mystery means she must have informed the client. How did Ms. Kyoko, who is both a cheapskate and cherishes human life, deliver the news?

No one knows anymore.

For the forgetful detective, that's a case of the past, meaning, it's beyond oblivion.

"Impressive. It's clear why you have completed your warrior's pilgrimage."

"My warrior's pilgrimage?"

I tilt my head at Mr. Kakushidate, who claps dramatically from beyond the bars—what is he talking about?

The journey I took with Ms. Kyoko was for office business activities...

"Oh? I had certainly thought that was just a pretext. I believe it was a campaign to train and nurture you as a bodyguard."

"..."

"Well done, you've passed. I won't say 'please let me call a detective!'—because you are a fine employee of the Okitegami Detective Agency, and I hereby recognize it. The letter I wish to hand over is left with Officer Hada, please receive it and go home—let's meet again, Mr. Oyagiri."

Next time, beyond the bars.

But that place might also be a locked room surrounded by a different cage—until the end, the False Accusations King, who posed like a major criminal and provided not so much a hint but nearly the answer itself, concluded with an innocent face.

...Of course, it's something to take with a grain of salt.

No matter what intentions were behind the long journey, that too is beyond oblivion—what Ms. Kyoko was thinking the day she impulsively set off on the trip.

It's not easy to completely deny the bizarre possibility that she came up with the idea to forge and polish me, a shaky bodyguard. At least if one is to thoroughly incorporate deductive

reasoning, it's something that cannot be ignored—the true intentions of the forgetful detective are, of course, as immeasurable as her common sense.

A company like a family—such foolish talk might not be just a joke. What kind of values the family holds as a community might vary from day to day—it may be more wholesome than rigid common sense.

The net that breaks the cage of common sense may be the net that never gets caught-one of thoroughness.

Be that as it may, now that I have been recognized as Ms. Kyoko's proxy by our esteemed client, my role must be fulfilled—Mr. Kakushidate seems to have slipped the "letter" in question into his belongings when he was put into the holding cell.

No, it even seems possible that he took on a false charge just to keep the "letter" safe—it would be unlikely to find a more secure place than a police station.

If so, his values for getting caught just to deliver a letter to Ms. Kyoko are indescribable as anything but abnormal—though he called it a letter, it wasn't in an envelope.

It was a small bottle.

Venetian glass?—Not likely, but inside the transparent glass bottle was a folded piece of paper.

Sealed, like a locked room.

"It's a bottled letter that washed up on the coast of the Hokuriku region—I was told to pass it on to you," I'm told by Officer Hada, who arrested Mr. Kakushidate, and I can't help but ask back, "The Hokuriku region?"

"Yes, the contents were a letter addressed to Ms. Kyoko Okitegami—it seems to have traveled around various places before finally reaching the suspect, Mr. Kakushidate. After all, he is a valued customer of your establishment."

"..."

A bottled letter—it's not unusual.

Even if Ms. Kyoko forgets, the islanders won't forget the famous detective who revealed the truth of the case—but, if "that island" released something into the sea, wouldn't it end up coming back to the island due to the currents? Could it be that out of the countless bottles released in desperation, one by chance washed ashore on the mainland?

But what could be the reason to resort to such a desperate measure—if there was a compelling circumstance that forced such an action, it's not something I can think about calmly.

Is it a request or a threatening letter?

Or perhaps—despite saying to take it with a grain of salt, I even thought that Mr. Kakushidate had made the whole thing up, but at least this small bottle and the letter within it are real.

While restraining my impatience, I, as a bodyguard belonging to the Okitegami Detective Agency, naturally opened the small bottle on the spot as part of my duty.

The end of the journey is the beginning of a new one.

It was a cipher on a musical score.

(Continues in "The Musical Score of Kyoko Okitegami")

Afterword

Mixing up "elevator" and "escalator" is a fairly common mistake, but upon looking into it, it seems there's a good reason for that—the word "escalator" is originally derived from "elevator." The idea is that an escalator is a stair version of an elevator... It's quite surprising in itself, but the fact that "escalator" originates from "elevator," not the other way around, is surprisingly refreshing. You might think, "Well, of course, that's how it is," but there was also an image that things evolved step by step from "stairs" → "escalator" → "elevator." However, that's not the case. If we were to use arrows to indicate the relationships, it would be "stairs" → "escalator" ← "elevator," which seems to be the correct interpretation. Even though both mechanisms serve the same purpose of moving up and down inside a building, stairs and elevators were established from completely different routes, and it's not that the two came together to create the escalator... Or is that lineage chart a bit off? After all, the structure of elevators and escalators are completely different... Well, there's a reason why these mix-ups happen; if it's normal to give similar things similar names, then it's also normal for them to be confusing.

In that sense, the titles of the Forgetful Detective series are the epitome of confusion, and even I, the author, sometimes get mixed up about which title corresponds to which content. Even though each book stands alone, there is a sort of lineage chart like "I wrote this because I wrote that," which also leads to entanglements. If I could completely forget each title, at least that would prevent any mix-ups, but forgetting is just as difficult as remembering. For reference, if you call an elevator a "lift," at least you won't make a mistake from the elevator side. In such a manner, this was the eleventh installment of the Forgetful Detective series...? "The Ticket of Kyoko Okitegami"...?

This time, the cover illustrated by Mr. VOFAN features Ms. Kyoko in the midst of moving from somewhere to somewhere else. Speaking of which, I often find myself getting on a train just to read a book. I hope this book can be read in the same way.

Nisio Isin